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Miri Mikawa

Illustration by Aki

Sugar Apple Fairy Tale

The Silver Sugar Master and the Blue Duke

Sugar ★ Apple Fairy★ Tale

The Silver Sugar Master and the Blue Duke

2

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Illustration by Aki


NEW YORK

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Sugar*Apple Fairy Tale 2

Miri Mikawa

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The Silver Sugar Master and the Blue Duke



Sugar + Apple Fairy Tale



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The Silver Sugar Master and the Blue Duke



**Sugar
Apple
Fairy Tale**

SON OF
CONFECTIONERS
Jonas

FAIRY
Mithril

FAIRY
Cathy

I'm
a candy
crafter.

SILVER SUGAR
MASTER IN THE
MAKING
Anne

WARRIOR FAIRY
Challe

So
I will
secure
victory
with my
sugar
candy.

SILVER SUGAR
VISCOUNT
Hugh

SILVER SUGAR MASTER &
SILVER SUGAR VISCOUNT

Special artisans deemed worthy by the king to craft sacred
confections are known as Silver Sugar Masters. The top capdy
craftsman, the Silver Sugar Viscount, is selected from among
all the Silver Sugar Masters and given the title.

Sugar + Apple Fairy Tale

The Silver Sugar Master and the Blue Duke

Chapter 1

WHEN THE SNOW FALLS

Anne felt something cold fall gently onto the tip of her nose. She looked up to see gray clouds, hung low and spreading out across the sky. Snowflakes fluttered down from above in ones and twos.

“Snow... Alas, it’s snowing,” Anne mumbled pessimistically, rooted to the spot. By contrast, a small fairy danced with joy up on the roof of the wagon that was parked behind her.

“Wow! It’s snow. I love snow! It’s so pretty, huh? Isn’t it, Anne?!”

The fairy’s blue eyes sparkled. Born from a drop of lake water, he was named Mithril Lid Pod.

“What will we do...?”

“What is there to do? It’s so beautiful!”

“This is terrible...”

Mithril was frolicking happily, while Anne was sinking into despair. Neither of them was paying attention to the other’s disposition. But luckily, one member of their party remained composed: another fairy, lying stretched out across the seat of the cart, long legs dangling over the side.

“Not that I really care, but how about giving your customers their goods?” he said, sitting up.

Anne blinked and looked back at the young woman standing in front of her.

“Ah! I’m sorry, I spaced out. So...uh...?”

The woman, dressed in a luxurious fur cape, was not looking at Anne. Rather, she was staring blankly at the driver's seat of the wagon.

Anne let out a quiet sigh and glanced over her shoulder to where the young woman had directed her gaze.

Oh well. I suppose next to him, everything else looks dull.

The woman was staring at the fairy, who had now sat up on the wagon. He had glossy black hair and black eyes. The obsidian fairy was cold and lovely in appearance, like falling snow. Fluttering snowflakes landed on his eyelashes. In spite of herself, Anne was captivated by the sight, too.

...Beautiful.

But this fairy had a sharp tongue.

"Scarecrow. Hurry up and give her the merchandise."

Anne's fascination broke the instant he called her *scarecrow*.

"Challe! I told you not to call me that!"

"Well, hurry up, then, slowpoke."

After those few words, the obsidian fairy Challe Fenn Challe lay back down again.

Anne pulled herself together and addressed the still-dumbfounded young woman in an especially loud voice.

"Ahem!"

"Huh, ah, oh."

At the sound of her voice, the woman snapped out of it and looked back at her.

Anne smiled with relief. "Here you go. Your total is two cress."

She carefully presented a large sugar candy to the young woman.

Its flashy design consisted of a bundle of multicolored spring flowers. The arrangement and colors had been cleverly thought out so that the different types of blossoms would not clash with one another. The young woman had

commissioned it from Anne a week earlier.

She had asked for *“a magnificent candy sculpture, a bouquet with at least ten kinds of flowers.”*

Candy made from silver sugar is used in all sorts of ceremonies. It drives away misfortune and invites joy. It is a sacred food, and it is said to hold “the promise of sweet happiness.” The more beautiful the form, the greater the joy that will come.

Anne was a candy crafter who made such sweets.

The expression on the young woman’s face when she saw the candy was proof of Anne’s skill.

“Isn’t it wonderful?”

The woman seemed surprised as she said those simple words. Then she looked back over her shoulder at the fairy she had brought with her. He was slender and elegant and youthful, and he was just a little bit taller than the woman. He looked unspeakably frail.

“You. Carry that sugar candy.”

The docile-looking fairy did as he was told and took it from Anne’s hands.

The fairy sounded deeply impressed when he said, “Of all the candy sculptures prepared for my lady’s birthday these past several years, this one is the best.”

The young woman answered curtly, “I suppose. All right, here’s your fee. You’d better accept it.”

With the clinking of pocket change, the woman dropped ten copper coins into Anne’s hand. Anne cocked her head.

“Um, the fee is two cress. You’re still one cress short.”

“That should be plenty.”

“Huh? We agreed upon two cress.”

“I commissioned you because I heard rumors about your skill, but you aren’t a real Silver Sugar Master, are you? Around these parts, only a Silver Sugar

Master can expect to make more than one cress. That's the most an ordinary candy crafter makes. Take it and be glad."

"But! A promise is a promise!"

The young woman smiled placidly as Anne tried to protest.

"Oh my. In that case, I suppose I don't have to buy it at all."

When she said that, Anne's words caught in her throat.

If the woman didn't buy her candy, all the silver sugar and hard work that had gone into it would be totally wasted.

"Hey, hey, hey! Human lady! From what I could hear, you sound mighty stingy. I, the great Mithril Lid Pod, cannot keep quiet about this..."

Atop the wagon roof, Mithril shouted and started rolling up his sleeves.

"Hush, Mithril Lid Pod. Things will only get worse if you get involved."

Challe interrupted Mithril's shouting. Then he sat up on the driver's seat again.

"What did you say?! Don't sound all high and mighty when you're just lazing around!"

"You kicking up a fuss isn't helping things, either."

"Excuse you—!!"

Ignoring Mithril's clamor, Challe alighted from the wagon. The single wing on his back was like translucent silk. He walked over to Anne with slightly weary, deliberate movements. Even those listless steps had an elegant charm to them.

"Do you want to take it back?" Challe asked quietly.

His hushed voice had a dangerous ring to it. His wing glowed with a cold silver brilliance.

"I can get your candy back and make her pay the two cress as well. What do you want to do?"

Perhaps as a fellow fairy, the one accompanying the young woman sensed Challe's strength and threatening aura. The single wing on his back shuddered.

“I don’t know what you’re planning to do, but I can tell it won’t be very nice, whatever it is.”

“That depends on what you do next,” Challe warned matter-of-factly.

Frankly, Anne didn’t want to sell her wares to a customer like this. But she had made the candy sculpture to fulfill the young woman’s order. She felt that turning her down and selling the piece to someone else would be like foisting secondhand goods on them. It would be discourteous to whoever bought it.

Anne hated the idea of matching the woman’s unscrupulous actions with underhanded behavior of her own, as Challe had suggested.

She shook her head. “No... Challe, it’s fine.”

She needed money at the moment, however little. Anne turned back toward the young woman and looked her directly in the eye.

“What? Have you got something else to say?” asked the woman.

“No. Very well. One cress will do. You may take it.”

Anne stared at the young woman, who flinched for a second. Then she snorted, putting on a brave front. She turned her back to Anne and quickly walked away.

Before he left, the fairy accompanying the woman fearfully averted his gaze from Challe. “I’m sorry,” he apologized quietly, bowing to Anne. Then he quickly chased after his mistress.

The figures of the young woman and her fairy grew distant in the lightly falling snow.

Their path was hemmed in on both sides by walls of red brick; it was a narrow alleyway. The passage meandered before sloping upward. At the top was the town’s shopping district, set along a broad avenue paved with cobblestones. Both sides of the street were lined with shops that had wide front windows. Anne thought the young woman must have hailed from a family that owned one of those stores.

About ten years ago, the town had begun to flourish when it became a stop on a trading route for wool manufactured in the North. Now it had developed

into a huge city, the second biggest after Lewiston, the royal capital.

This was Westol, the capital of Charmae Province.

Charmae was adjacent to Harrington Province, where Lewiston was located. Charmae was governed by the Earl of Downing, an elder statesman who had displayed his tact during the reign of the previous monarch.

Anne dropped the copper coins into the pocket of her dress. Then she shrugged, feeling dejected.

“I should have known it would be hard selling silver sugar candy without being a Silver Sugar Master. We’re right in the Silver Sugar Viscount’s backyard, after all.”

“That’s right, dammit! That asshole, Hugh.”

Mithril glowered in the direction of the shopping district.

Wearing a worried expression, Anne grumbled, “Well...Hugh isn’t necessarily to blame, though...”

Hugh was the name of the current Silver Sugar Viscount, that being the title given to the Silver Sugar Master who worked exclusively for the king. The Viscount is considered the pinnacle of all candy crafters, including the Silver Sugar Masters.

Anne had become acquainted with Hugh by chance about two months ago. He had helped her in her quest to become a Silver Sugar Master.

Ultimately, however, she had not been able to become one.

Above the rows of houses lining the shopping district, Anne could see the spire of Westol Castle, the provincial governor’s residence. It was probably a watchtower. Shifting her gaze west from the spire built of black rock, she could make out another almost identical tower constructed of pale stone.

Across a small lake stood a white structure, an exact copy of Westol Castle. It was named Silver Westol Castle and was granted to the Silver Sugar Viscount.

“There’s no way we can camp outside tonight, is there?”

Snow was falling continuously from the sky. The ground beneath the soles of

Anne's shoes were hard, and it was beginning to freeze. The sun set quickly in winter, and it was already growing dark.

The snow might stick tonight.

Anne pulled her cape tight over her dress.

Crafted from tanned leather and lined with feathers, the cloak was embossed with designs of various plants. It was a top-quality garment and exceptionally effective at retaining heat. It was much too luxurious for someone of Anne's standing.

"This cape is a lifesaver. I'll have to thank Kat again."

Anne had acquired the cloak in Lewiston, just before coming to Westol. She'd happened to encounter an eccentric Silver Sugar Master, a young man who went by the nickname Kat, who had asked her for help with a job. He'd given her the cape as a reward.

Anne's journey had become much easier thanks to the garment.

The fairies didn't feel cold, so they weren't affected by the chilly winter. They would probably be fine camping out in the snow. Yet even with her cloak, it would be impossible for Anne to spend the night exposed to the elements.

"Let's go, Challe, Mithril. We'll have to stay at an inn tonight. I need to find someplace cheap."

As she spoke, Anne turned toward her old horse-drawn wagon.

That wagon had once been hijacked, but she'd later found it abandoned on the outskirts of Lewiston. Anne had traveled with her mother for fifteen years in that wagon, and it held many memories. Though it was old and shabby, she had been overjoyed to get it back.

Anne took the horse by the bridle without getting up on the driver's seat.

In the opposite direction from the shops, she headed down the alleyway. The ground sloped gently downward, and the road gradually broadened.

"Hooray! We're staying at an inn! I love watching the snow fall through the window," Mithril said from the roof in a cheerful tone.

Anne smiled. “Me too. When you watch snow from a warm room, you can enjoy the beauty of it without feeling the cold.”

Pulling the horse along, Anne moved the carriage slowly. Once she started walking, Challe came up beside her and asked, “What about money? Do you have enough?”

He was acting nonchalant, but Challe knew how little money Anne had on hand, and she could tell he was worried for her.

Anne’s earnings were meager. Few customers were willing to buy sugar candy from a fifteen-year-old girl who was not even a Silver Sugar Master. She did have customers who were aware of her skill and would place orders from time to time. Even so, people often struck a hard bargain, like the woman earlier.

“Leave it to me... Actually, I don’t have enough to say that. That’s why it’s got to be a cheap inn.”

I’m not really looking for luxury. As long as it keeps us out of the cold, any inn will do.

But it’ll be Pure Soul Day in just over a month. And then the end of the year will be upon us...

The temperature would continue dropping by the day. She needed to find lodging to stay out of the cold for the rest of winter.

On top of that, Anne would soon have to get started on making her Pure Soul Day sugar candy to send her departed mother off to heaven. She wanted to secure accommodations and get settled in if possible, then spend time making something spectacular.

Moreover, she hoped she could hunker down and spend New Year’s Eve in her lodgings.

She wanted to do it for her companions, Mithril and Challe. Even if it wasn’t much, she hoped they could enjoy a pleasant holiday. Anne wanted the three of them to celebrate the New Year comfortably together.

Well, all of that requires money, huh?

Anne thought about her meager savings and felt miserable.

“Shall I earn us some cash?” Challe asked suddenly.

Anne’s eyes went wide at the unexpected words. “Earn money? How?”

“I’ve got my ways.”

“You’re not thinking of doing something dangerous?!”

“Do you really think I’m that savage? Do I look like I might go and mug someone?”

Challe gave Anne a look of displeasure.

The fairy did seem like he could calmly commit robbery. But Anne couldn’t say that, so she answered with a stiff smile.

“I don’t think that at all, no. But as far as your special skills go, you’re good at being violent.”

“I can make a fair amount of cash by searching out humans with time and money to spare and renting myself to them for the night.”

Challe said the unthinkable as if it were no big deal. Anne went pale.

“Wh-wh-wh-what are you saying?! Do you understand the meaning of what you just said?! You’re talking about selling yourself!”

“Indeed.”

“No, not ‘indeed’! I would never ask you to do something like that, even if my life was at stake. You absolutely mustn’t, Challe!!”

“Why not?”

He asked the question earnestly, and Anne blushed. That wasn’t something to ask a fifteen-year-old girl.

Anne wondered what on Earth had become of Challe’s sense of virtue. Perhaps one forgot the very notion when they’d lived over a hundred years. In fact, she often wondered about the things he might have experienced in that time. She could only imagine, and the color drained from her face. Anne didn’t even want to think of such things.

As she blanched, Mithril tutted and wagged his finger with a smug look on his face.

“How can you ask why, Challe Fenn Challe? Honestly, guys like you who don’t understand women’s hearts could never have a human partner.”

“Understanding wouldn’t change anything.”

“Nooo way, you’re wrong.”

“It’s all the same.”

“It is not, and both of you are missing the point!!”

Anne shouted with all her might.

“This is a question of dignity! Anyway, let me worry about money. Challe, you don’t have to concern yourself over it. Actually, don’t even think about it! Please!”

Challe looked a little shocked at Anne’s declaration.

“You’re very stubborn.”

It wasn’t exactly stubbornness. Anne was worn out.

If Challe had offered to make money by baking and selling bread, or repairing shoes, she probably would have accepted his help. But she had a hunch that his moneymaking schemes were all too dreadful to consider.

Anne made it down the hill. There were redbrick buildings standing here and there in ones and twos, with large gaps between them. In the open spaces, broken-down vehicles and farm equipment lay in piles.

Anne looked around, and her eyes settled on one of the buildings.

It was long and stood at two stories tall. Beside it was a stable with a simple roof. Hanging from the structure’s brick wall was a wooden signboard carved with a design featuring hats and boots advertising lodgings.

The establishment was unmistakably an inn, but it seemed awfully shabby. The tiles on the eaves were falling apart and seemed like they might slide off in an avalanche at any moment. But Anne was in no position to expect luxury.

She parked her wagon beside the stable. Accompanied by Challe and Mithril, she entered the inn.

The bar-cum-dining-room on the first floor had a musty smell to it, a mixture

of dust and old cooking oil.

Behind the counter was the bone-thin, bald proprietor. When Anne asked him about the prices, he answered that the cost was thirty bayn per person per night. He closely scrutinized Challe.

A night's stay would cost ninety bayn for the three of them. The single cress that Anne had just earned would basically disappear.

Her remaining funds did not even total two cress.

Even so, there was no way they could camp out in the snow. With the money she had currently, they could keep out of the elements at this inn for three days. Anne resolved to earn more during that time and requested a room.

The room she was shown to was dark. The wooden window frame was nailed shut and would not open.

Moreover, there was only a single bed, and it filled the whole space. The room was so small that Anne and Challe had to twist their bodies around just to move past each other as they looked down at the bed.

"I can't see a thing through the window...," Mithril grumbled, sounding disappointed.

"Sorry. We'll stay at a nicer place if I ever get my hands on some money."

Anne looked around the room as she spoke. The corpse of a huge spider was lying on the floor under the bed. Disgusted, she shuddered slightly.

Just then, she heard someone hesitantly knocking at their door.

"Yes?"

Once Anne answered, the door opened slowly. Timidly peeking in was an old woman. She was completely covered from head to toe by a plain woolen shawl. Anne had seen her before.

"Ma'am? I believe we met a couple of weeks ago?"

Just after Anne arrived in Westol, the old woman had placed an order for sugar candy. This was two weeks before she'd received the commission from the merchant's daughter who had come to retrieve her candy sculpture earlier

in the day. The old woman was supposed to have picked up her candy two weeks ago, but she had not appeared on the appointed day.

With no alternative, Anne still had the candy she had made for the woman sitting in her wagon.

“I saw your wagon outside. The innkeeper told me you were in this room. I’m sorry for being so late, dear.”

The old woman fished ten copper coins from the pocket of her threadbare dress.

“One cress, as we agreed. I’ve got it right here.”

“Great! Thank you, ma’am.”

Anne gratefully accepted the money.

“Your sugar candy is in the wagon. Why don’t we go downstairs together? After I give it to you, we can get a little something to eat.”

Thanks to the extra income, Anne had a bit more breathing room now. She had expected to gnaw on some dried berries before bed that night, but with another cress in her pocket, she felt she could afford to have some soup.

The bar-cum-dining-room was quiet, with only two or three groups of customers. Anne left the old woman and the two fairies to wait there and went to get the sugar candy from her wagon.

“What do you think of this? Per your order, it’s a pair of snow birds.”

The candy sculpture depicted two white birds with slim, delicate legs. Their long necks curved gently downward, and their beaks were pressed together as if they were whispering to each other.

Snow birds are migratory. They fly from the continent to the Kingdom of Highland at the beginning of winter. And once these birds choose a mate, they never change partners, and they live the rest of their lives as a pair. They are a motif favored by lovers and couples.

The innkeeper and the other customers stared at the candy sculpture Anne had carried in with surprise. The workmanship on the finely etched feathers drew their eyes.

The old woman nodded repeatedly, looking pleased.

“It’s beautiful. Yes, lovely. My husband told me he wanted snow birds. This is wonderful.”

“Is it a present for him or something?” Anne asked innocently.

The old woman smiled sadly.

“No, this is for Pure Soul Day. My husband always told me that for the year he died, he wanted a snow bird candy sculpture for Pure Soul Day. But every candy crafter I talked to told me it would be impossible to make for under a cress. So I decided to sell my ring to pull together at least one cress. But I just couldn’t sell it for the price I expected to get. I’m so sorry for being late. You were the only one who would accept my commission at the lowest cost for a candy sculpture in Westol. Thank you for making something so beautiful for so little.”

Mithril clicked his tongue when he heard that one cress was the minimum market price for a candy sculpture.

“I can’t believe that rich lady. She lied and bought Anne’s candy for a rock-bottom price!”

Anne also realized what the merchant’s daughter had done to her when she heard the old woman’s words.

However, she was more concerned about the circumstances of the customer in front of her, who was gazing lovingly at the candy sculpture.

The old woman’s dress was worn out around the cuffs and hem and covered in stains. Her woolen shawl was pilling and thin. Despite her shabby clothes, she had always worn her ring. It must have been very important to her. Yet she’d had to sell it in order to afford the candy for her dead husband.

The woman’s fingers, knotted and gnarled like a withered tree, looked like they were in pain. Her body was thin, and it wasn’t difficult to imagine that she rarely ate.

“Well then, I’ll be taking this with me.”

The old woman stood up. As she did, Anne quickly fished five copper coins from her dress pocket.

“Ah, I almost forgot. Wait a minute, ma’am. Here’s your change.”

She pressed them into the old woman’s hand.

Mithril shouted in surprise.

“Anne?!”

Cradling the sugar candy sculpture in one arm, the old woman looked at Anne with slight confusion.

“Oh, but I only gave you one cress, right?”

“I miscalculated the amount of silver sugar I needed to use. This piece of candy only costs fifty bayn.”

“Wait, but it’s so big...and besides, the minimum price—”

“I’m not a Silver Sugar Master, so I don’t make candies that cost that much. And I don’t live in Westol, so the market price doesn’t mean anything to me. Please, take your change.”

Anne’s broad smile clued the old woman in to what was going on. Looking apologetic, she tucked the coins into her dress pocket and whispered, “Thank you so much. I can buy a month’s worth of grain with this.”

Anne watched the woman leave the inn with slow steps, then sat down in a chair. Half of her thought that she had just done something foolish, while the other half was happy with her decision.

Challe was sitting across from her. When she glanced at his face, he looked like he had something to say.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Keeping his legs crossed and his chin in his hands, Challe abruptly averted his gaze.

I bet he wanted to call me stupid or tell me how brainless that was.

Anne looked up at the ceiling. She understood the consequences of her actions, and she was fine with it.

Mithril, however, was a different story. He hopped up on the table, eyebrows raised.

“Anne! Why would you give back half your payment?!”

Anne shifted her gaze to Mithril and smiled.

“You misunderstand. That sugar candy was really worth fifty bayn.”

“You’re lying, you dummy! If you keep doing things like that, you’ll starve to death!”

“It’s fine,” Anne insisted. “I’ll get proper payment from my wealthier customers.”

“It is not fine!” Mithril sternly thrust his index finger at her. “I’ve been saying this for a while, but you need to be more conscious of your current financial situation! Do you think you’re in a position to be concerned about that old lady? You’ve only got about three cress to your name...”

Before Mithril could launch into a lecture, something smacked the back of his head.

It was Challe, who had struck him with an open palm.

“Ow! What are you doing? Who slaps somebody in the head?”

“I could flick you instead if you would prefer.”

“But I’m tiny; a flick from you would kill me instantly!”

“Probably, yeah.”

“You knew that and suggested it anyway?! You’re a monster!”

“You made me say it. Pipe down. You’re making a scene.”

Challe had a pointed look in his eye. Mithril and Anne followed his gaze to the innkeeper, who was standing behind the bar counter.

The proprietor was wearing an unpleasant grin. He set down the plate he had been wiping, came out from behind the counter, and walked over to the table where Anne and the fairies were sitting.

“Say, miss. Are you sure you’ve got enough money to pay the lodging fees?”

In contrast to the professional demeanor he'd maintained earlier, he was acting overly familiar now.

"I sure do—the full amount. One person is thirty bayn, so it's ninety bayn per night for the three of us."

"Fraid not. I'm sure I told you earlier that it's five cress per person per night."

Anne was dumbfounded at his words.

"You never said that. I know you told me it was thirty bayn each per night."

"You must have misheard me. It's five cress."

"That's an outrageous price!"

"Oh, didn't you know? Hotel charges for high-end places like this typically run four or five cress a night. That price is perfectly reasonable. It's not so ridiculous that I would get punished by the governor, even if you filed a complaint."

"Then we won't stay here. We're leaving."

"That's fine, but I'll have to collect a cancellation fee. You already went into the room, after all. The cancellation fee is five cress."

Anne lost her cool. She stood up and in a harsh voice shouted at him, "If you're going to be that crooked, I really will complain to the governor!"

The innkeeper shrugged. "Go right ahead. It's your fault for mishearing me. I have every legal right to collect a cancellation fee. You're the one who'll be thrown in jail for the crime of trying to stay in an inn even though you have no money."

Why is the owner being so mean?

Anne couldn't understand it. But his cruel words still stung.

Anne scowled at him as hard as she could, and the innkeeper cackled.

"Don't make such a scary face, little lady. I'm not a bad guy. I'm prepared to overlook your mistake. I'll let you stay here just for tonight. But in exchange, you hand over that pet fairy to me. If you do that, I'll forget about the fee for one night's stay."

He was staring at Challe as he said that.

The fairy didn't so much as twitch. He was, however, glaring at the innkeeper with contempt.

Anne finally grasped the proprietor's ulterior motive.

Challe was like a top-rated gemstone. There could be no doubt that the innkeeper had been appraising him from the beginning, estimating how much the fairy would sell for.

The innkeeper was up against a single young girl. He assumed he would have no difficulty threatening or coaxing her and could easily confiscate her pet fairy.

He would overcharge her for the room, just to the limits of what was reasonable. Even though the amount was within the standard range, he'd heard from Mithril that Anne was unable to pay it. In the unlikely event that she complained, he could dismiss any accusations by claiming that his prices were reasonable.

Challe spread his palm out quietly on top of the table, a blank look on his face. Beads of light began to gather there. His beauty convinced people otherwise, but Challe was no pet. He was a warrior, skilled in combat. The fairy could stand against ten human warriors with ease when he conjured his magical sword.

And the light gathering in his hand signified he was about to do just that.

Anne was boiling with anger at the craven innkeeper.

Hand over Challe? What does he think Challe is?

As she fumed, the hem of her dress fluttered gently in the cold breeze. But she was too focused to pay it any mind.

Only Challe looked calmly in the direction of the front door, where the breeze had come from. Frowning slightly, he stopped the conjuring process with a nimble shake of his hand and remained calmly seated in his chair.

"I know what you're after, your little scheme. But too bad for you! He doesn't work for me, and I don't control him. It's not up to me to decide whether I give him over or not in the first place! He goes where he likes of his own volition, and he doesn't go where he doesn't want to."

Anne slapped her hand down on the table with great force.

“I won’t let you talk about Challe like he’s an object!”

“That’s right! If you tried to put a twisted guy like this to work, you’d regret it like crazy!”

Mithril chimed in too, shouting earnestly, as was his way.

“What are you talking about, young lady? The things you’re saying don’t make any sense. Anyway, all you have to do is hand over the wing of that pet fairy.”

“It’s not mine to give up! The wing is Challe’s.”

“I don’t need to hear any more whining from you, little girl. Give it here!”

Showing his true nature at last, the innkeeper lunged at Anne threateningly.

“That’s far enough.”

A cold, metallic voice came from behind the proprietor. Then a silver blade quickly came to rest against the base of his neck, its elegant arc gently curving around and over his shoulder.

The innkeeper gasped at the sudden appearance of the blade.

“Wh-what is this? What on Earth?”

Equally surprised, Anne glanced behind the innkeeper.

Standing there was a tanned young man with silver eyes and white hair, holding a gently curved sword in his hand. He had a limber-looking body, like that of a big predatory feline. His peculiar appearance wasn’t easily forgotten.

“Oh...it’s you! Salim, if I remember correctly...?”

Mithril, too, looked up at the man, flabbergasted.

Salim smiled slightly.

“Good evening. It’s been a while. So we meet again, Anne.”

“Why are you here...? Wait, if you’re here, then that means—”

Just then, someone embraced her from behind, wrapping her in strong, sturdy arms.

“Hey! It’s been a while, Anne. Getting into trouble like usual, huh?”

Startled by his jovial voice, Anne craned her neck to see who it was.

“Hugh?!”

The young man hugging her had messy brown hair that he’d carelessly combed back. He wore a simple but well-tailored jacket. His smiling brown eyes brimmed with a mixture of charm and wildness.

“You’re still so small and skinny.”

As he said that, Hugh ruffled Anne’s barley-colored hair.

Anne was overcome with surprise at the pair’s sudden entrance.

But Challe seemed like he had already been well aware of their presence. He sat there calmly, his chin resting in his hands.

“So you go around waltzing into places like this? You must have a lot of time on your hands.”

At Challe’s snide comment, Hugh flashed him a big grin.

“No, no, we just popped in. Today’s been so busy, my head was spinning. You could try being the tiniest bit enthusiastic or grateful, couldn’t you, Challe? You noticed when we came in but completely ignored us.”

As he spoke, Hugh squeezed Anne tightly.

“You’re going to snap the scarecrow in half. Let her go.”

“Oh? Are you jealous?”



“Who’s jealous? Of whom?”

Challe seemed openly displeased.

Anne’s mind finally started working again. She realized that Hugh was pressing himself closely against her.

“Wah! Hugh?! Let go of me!”

Hugh readily opened his arms when Anne started flailing and struggling. Then he made a show of looking sad.

“You guys really have no respect for me at all, do you?”

Anne leaped back over to Challe’s side and grabbed on to his sleeve cuff as he sat there calmly.

The innkeeper, with Salim’s blade at his throat, asked in a quivering voice, “Wh-who are you people? Robbers...? Th-the governor’s men will surely arrest you for something like this!”

“The governor’s men? Ah, I’m pretty well acquainted with the old governor, so I think we’ll be fine.”

Hugh approached the innkeeper. His formerly playful expression was now serious.

“My name is Hugh Mercury. I bear the title of Silver Sugar Viscount,” he announced.

Young as he was, Hugh was indeed the current Silver Sugar Viscount.

When he heard that name, the innkeeper’s face paled.

“You know, the Earl of Downing is an old friend of mine. And he’s quite zealous about keeping public order in Westol. So he was troubled to hear rumors of a crooked inn that was ripping off timid-looking travelers. The old man said, ‘If there’s any proof, hand out capital punishment on the spot.’”

Hugh grinned.

“With me as a witness, well, the old man won’t have a word of complaint. Not even if I execute you right here and now.”

The other customers in the room stood up fearfully and fled to stand by the wall.

The proprietor's legs began to tremble.

"Salim. Do it."

Anne reflexively clapped both hands over her mouth when she heard the coldhearted order. Despite that, she shouted, "You can't! Stop it!!"

The blade ran across the innkeeper's throat.

He fell to his knees and collapsed on the floor. He lay still where he'd fallen.

"No...no way. I don't care what the circumstances are; you can't just execute someone that quickly..." Anne muttered. She seemed like she might sink to the floor right then and there.

Challe stood up from his chair and supported her from the side.

"Scarecrow. Look carefully. He's just passed out."

Anne heard Challe's voice from above her head.

As he instructed, she looked closely at the fallen innkeeper. His eyes were rolled back, and he was lying with one cheek against the floor, but there was only a slight break in the skin at the base of his neck. It looked like he had just fainted out of fear.

This time, Anne clung to Challe's arm in relief.

Hugh gave further orders to Salim as he put his sword away.

"Salim. Summon the nearby guards. Hand this guy over to them. Once you're done with that, go back to the castle."

Salim nodded and left through the front door. After watching him go, Hugh rolled his head in gentle circles, as if to shake off his grim mood. Then he turned to Anne again.

"Sorry about that, Anne. Didn't mean to frighten you."

"What the...? Hugh...what are you doing here? Are you on patrol?"

"Nope. Actually, I don't have that kind of authority. I'm just the Silver Sugar

Viscount,” he said nonchalantly. “I just happened to run into you, so I thought I’d deal with that guy. I heard rumors that a young candy crafter had appeared in Westol with an unbelievably beautiful fairy in her company. I thought she sounded familiar, so I came looking, that’s all. Especially since it’s snowing tonight. I figured you wouldn’t be camping out, and I thought I’d find you pretty easily if I checked all the inns.”

Then Hugh bowed low, like an actor in a drama.

“I’ve searched far and wide for you, Miss Anne Halford. Allow me to invite you to Silver Westol Castle.”

Chapter 2

SUMMONED BY THE DUKE OF PHILAX

“Incredible,” Anne murmured. She was standing on a fourth-floor balcony that jutted out from the castle wall.

A dim, shadowy forest. A lake that was smooth like a black mirror. The scene of snow falling quietly from the twilight sky over the dimly lit forest was so solemn that it seemed to belie any sign of a human presence.

Until that moment, Anne had never looked down on the forest and lake from such a high vantage point. Whenever she peered down past her feet, she felt a rush of fear, as if something were quickly draining out of her, starting from the top of her head.

Compared with the cold outside on the balcony, her room was as warm as a spring day.

There was a fireplace, and it crackled with plenty of firewood. Anne’s bed looked wide enough for four people to lie down in side by side. It had posts at all four corners, and they held up a thick, heavy canopy.

She returned to her room and looked the bed up and down. “Ah, aristocrats... Just how many people are supposed to sleep in a bed this huge? And what’s the point of the canopy when it’s indoors?” she muttered half-jokingly.

It had been just before sunset when Anne and the fairies left the shabby inn with Hugh.

Then with Salim’s horse leading the way, she had driven her horse-drawn wagon to Silver Westol Castle.

Anne had been taken aback when Hugh had said he wanted to invite them to his castle. She'd wondered why he had gone out of his way to find her and why he'd extended the invitation. She couldn't fathom what he was really after.

Nonetheless, she had decided to accept his offer. Frankly, she was grateful for it.

The town of Westol was situated over a gentle slope. The very top opened up onto a plateau, where there was a lake. Standing on opposite sides of the lake were Westol Castle and Silver Westol Castle, identical in form but opposite in color, one black and one white.

The pair were refined works of architecture and incorporated the plateau's forest and lake into their landscape.

They were new, having been erected fifteen years earlier after a civil war. Their gates lacked the forbidding portcullises or other fortifications necessary during wartime.

These castles had been built as symbols of authority and as places for the owners to live comfortably.

This was a world that Anne, who had spent the fifteen years since her birth wandering from place to place, had never known. She had never seen a castle so close up and was frankly overwhelmed by its size.

It had taken some urging to get Anne through the gate and into the outer block, where she'd left her wagon with the staff. Another entryway led her to the innermost enclosure of the castle. The stones of the outer wall had been polished until smooth. The smooth finish made the white rock wall of the castle tower look very beautiful.

Anne, Challe, and Mithril had each been assigned their own individual rooms in the castle tower.

The three of them had always slept within sight of one another, so when they were shown to separate rooms, Anne had felt a little bit lonely. But Challe was in the room next to hers, and Mithril was in the one next to his.

She wouldn't miss them. That's what she had tried to tell herself when she first set foot in her quarters.

“Are you lacking anything? If so, I will bring it.” A servant fairy had entered the room along with Anne. Her appearance was that of a grown adult woman, prim and smartly attired, but she was still only about the height of a child. She’d poured Anne a hot cup of herbal tea with a refreshing aroma first thing after they’d entered, and it tasted wonderful.

There are fairies dwelling in the Kingdom of Highland, where Anne lives. They are born in nature, with two wings on their backs. Some of them have special powers as well. But the fairies of the present day are an unfortunate lot.

Human beings capture them and use them for manual labor. They pluck off one of their wings, the essence of their life, and force them to do their bidding.

Anne didn’t want to use fairies in that way. She considered Challe and Mithril friends of equal standing.

Now the servant fairy was stooping to add more kindling to the fire. It looked like hard work, and she was lugging the heavy logs with both hands.

Anne rushed over to her, flustered.

“Wait, it’s fine. I can do it myself.”

“That’s all right. It’s part of my job.”

“But that doesn’t change that I’m probably about ten times stronger than you are. The stronger person should do the lifting.”

The fairy looked stunned when Anne took the firewood out of her arms. Then she burst out laughing.

“You’re a strange one!” she remarked.

“Oh, am I?” Anne asked as she threw the wood into the fire. “But isn’t it obvious that I’m better suited for the job?”

The fairy smiled bitterly. “The way you treat the staff is a little odd. But I am jealous of those two.”

She must have been referring to Challe and Mithril.

Challe and Mithril each had one wing on their backs, but they’d both reclaimed the wing that had been taken from them. They were free fairies.

Anne started to feel guilty. She could give one or two fairies their freedom, but that was the most she was capable of. Helping all the fairies in the world was beyond her abilities.

“If I were rich, I would buy your wing back from Hugh for you, but...”

“Don’t worry about it. The Viscount is a good master, and I am happy living here. I’m just a bit jealous that they get to travel the world with someone like you, is all. Is there anything else you need?”

“There’s not. Really, I’m fine. Thank you.”

With a smile, the fairy said, “Please pull this cord to ring the bell if you need anything,” and left.

Once she departed, Anne was all alone. The room felt too big.

She sat down lightly and hesitantly on the bed and listened for any sounds from the room next door.

I wonder what Challe is doing. Maybe I’ll go peek in on him.

It had been almost two and a half months since Anne had met Challe. In that time, she couldn’t help but grow accustomed to his presence.

Now that he was out of her sight like this, she felt somewhat uneasy.

Right from the start, Anne had thought Challe had been in the wrong for kissing her hand after the last Royal Candy Fair. She had wondered what he meant by doing it. She couldn’t understand it. She wanted to ask him why he’d done that, but she was embarrassed by the question and couldn’t do it.

At any rate, the sweet shiver that had run through her heart when he kissed her still lingered at her core. From time to time, the sensation resurfaced. It was a problem.

Anne clambered into bed. She must have looked suspicious as she pressed her ear against the wall between her room and the one next door.

She briefly listened for any signs of Challe moving. As she was listening—

“Can you hear anything?” someone asked from behind her back.

She answered unwittingly, “Nuh-uh. No, it’s quiet... Wait, ah!”

Anne narrowly avoided falling off the bed. Challe had grabbed her arm to stop her.

Anne was hanging halfway off the bed with Challe looking down at her. His black hair brushed smoothly against her cheek.

“What are you doing?”

“N-n-nothing. Nothing at all.”

Anne broke out in a cold sweat, and her ears turned bright red. When he saw that, Challe, who had one knee up on the mattress, chuckled. “Are you lonely sleeping by yourself?” he teased.

“No way. I’m not a child!”

“Your bed is huge. I’ll sleep in it with you,” he whispered in a sweet voice.

Anne knew it was a bad joke, but just hearing those words set her face on fire.

“No! No thank you, that’s quite all right! Actually, why are you even here?!”

Anne shook her arm free and pushed Challe away. She kept crawling across the bed to escape to where he couldn’t reach her.

Looking amused, Challe climbed off the bed. “You seemed sad when you headed into your room. So I came to get a look at your lonesome, crying face.”

“I’m not crying. And I’m not lonely, either,” Anne replied. She managed to escape to the edge of the bed and sit up properly.

“If that’s true, what were you doing just now?”

“That was... You see, this castle is truly splendid. I was just examining the texture of the wall...”

She made an awkward excuse, averting her gaze.

Challe grinned. He seemed to see right through all of Anne’s thoughts with his deep-black eyes.

He probably didn’t know how often she thought about him. Whenever she considered that he might have figured it out, she felt unbearably embarrassed.

Challe turned on his heel and walked to the center of the room. Utterly at

ease, he relaxed on a couch seated there, as if he owned the place. He leaned his weight against the armrest.

His graceful movements were a perfect match for the luxurious accommodations.

“You don’t seem impressed by this castle, Challe. You haven’t looked very excited ever since we arrived. Mithril Lid Pod and I keep being shocked by its size, but not you.”

Anne strung together some words in order to change the subject.

“All castles are the same.”

“Have you been to one before, Challe?”

“I lived in one, for fifteen years. Their construction hasn’t changed much in the last century.”

“You mean...”

Suddenly, Anne felt like cold air had passed through her chest.

You mean the castle you lived in with that girl named Liz?

Only once had Challe opened up to Anne about his past.

A fairy is born when the energy of an object—for example a water droplet, or a flower, or a berry, or a gemstone—is condensed by the gaze of a living creature.

Challe had been born when the energy in a piece of obsidian gathered from the stares of a little girl. The girl’s name was Elizabeth, and she was five years old at the time. She was the daughter of a noble family, and she took Challe back to her estate and gave him shelter. After that, fifteen years passed, and Challe lived with her that whole time. But she was killed by human hands.

Challe called Elizabeth by her nickname, Liz. Anne felt that alone was enough to tell her how close he and the girl had been.

“What?” Challe asked Anne suspiciously when she suddenly fell silent.

Anne, startled by his question, tried to smile.

“Ah, um... It’s just, well—”

The castle that you lived in for fifteen years, was that the place where you lived with Liz?

Anne had been about to ask him casually.

But the words were caught in her throat. Anne felt strangely uneasy, as though someone had ripped off the scab on a wound she had completely forgotten about.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s, uh. Nothing...”

Her chest hurt whenever she thought about Liz. As to why she had such feelings, she couldn’t say.

Anne was overcome by the desire to flee from Challe’s gaze as he stared fixedly at her.

Then there came a knock at the door.

“Ah...come in!”

The sound of this divine intervention caused Anne to jump down from the bed, where she had been sitting. She ran over to the door.

She opened it to find Hugh.

“How is your room? Comfortable?”

“Ah, Hugh. Thank you, it’s very nice. In fact, it’s too fancy. I feel really out of place.”

When she said that, Hugh cackled. He put his arm against the doorframe and looked down at Anne.

“You’ll get used to it after you sleep here for a night. Humans have a hard time adapting to harsh circumstances but quickly get used to a comfortable environment, after all. Anyway, Anne—”

Hugh looked her square in the face and whispered as if he was sharing a secret.

“I’ve got something I want to show you. Won’t you come with me? It’s a place where we cannot bring Challe or Mithril. The invitation is for you alone.

However, I can assure you that we will remain on the castle grounds. Honestly, it won't take that long. We'll just kill some time before dinner's ready."

Anne wanted to escape Challe's gaze as soon as possible. She nodded without hesitation.

"I'll go. Right now?"

"Yes."

Anne turned and looked back but avoided meeting the fairy's eyes. "Challe. Hugh says he's got something to show me. I'll be gone for a little while."

She hurried out of the room and pulled the door closed behind her. Once she was out of his sight, she breathed a sigh of relief.

With that done, she started to wonder where she was being taken.

"What is it that you want to show me?" she asked as she followed Hugh's broad back.

"I don't want to spoil the surprise," he answered, glancing back at her with a faint smile.

"I wonder what it could be? I can't even imagine... Wait, oh, that's right! I can't imagine where we're going, but I did just remember something!" Anne picked up her pace a little bit and walked alongside Hugh. "Before I came to Westol, in Lewiston, a Silver Sugar Master named Kat looked after me. He's an acquaintance of yours, right? He told me to give you his regards if I ever ran into you."

Hugh looked surprised when Anne brought up Kat.

"Kat did? Huh, really? I guess he's doing well. But knowing him, the message to me was less 'Best regards' and more 'Drop dead' or 'You dimwit' or something along those lines."

"W-well, maybe... He may be strange, but he's a decent guy. He gave me a cape."

"If it's one of his, it must be of high quality. You made off with something good, huh?"

In the center of the castle tower was a spiral staircase, built with room for traffic to come and go at each level.

They descended the stairs to the first floor, then proceeded down the corridor that connected directly to the entrance hall. The hallway ended at a wall and split into right and left passages.

Hugh came to a stop in front of that wall.

There was a single door set into it.

“Here we are. Normally, I’m the only one who comes in here. You could say I don’t allow anyone else to enter.”

He opened the door and chilly air, characteristic of a basement, blew up from below.

On the other side was a narrow set of stairs that hugged the wall as they continued beneath the castle.

Hugh retrieved a lamp from a cavity cut into the wall beside the stairs. He lit the lamp and held it aloft as he descended.

“Sorry, it’s brighter during the day, but—”

At the bottom, about twenty steps down, was a circular room. The sound of trickling water echoed through the space.

Brandishing his lamp, Hugh started walking, following the rounded wall. Apparently, there were lanterns installed at regular intervals. He lit those one after another, using the one he was holding.

Once Hugh finished making his circuit, there were eight more lamps burning along the wall.

“This is...”

Anne was amazed to see the circular room that was illuminated by the lamps.

In the center was a stone workbench as long as three adults standing side by side with their arms outstretched. There was a cavity carved all the way around the wall, which served as a shelf for rows of colored powders.

There must have been thousands of glass vials containing colored powders.

There were so many of them.

A porcelain pipe was sticking out from a notch in a section of the wall. From the pipe trickled a steady stream of clear water that seemed to come from underground. The liquid collected in a basin, which had been designed so that if it overflowed, it would be drained into the duct around the perimeter of the room.

When Anne looked up, she saw there was no ceiling. The dark, empty space just continued up and up.

They were probably in one of the castle's other spires, and it was open from the basement all the way to the very top. She could make out several window-like gaps high up above her head.

The space was probably designed so that light from the windows would pour down into the chamber during the day.

"Is it alright for me to be here, Hugh?" Anne asked without thinking.

She was in the personal workshop of the Silver Sugar Viscount.

Even ordinary candy crafters like Anne treated their workshops like sacred spaces. The workshop of the Silver Sugar Viscount was akin to the altar of the Church of Saint Lewiston Bell, the headquarters of the state religion.

This was where Hugh made sugar candy for the royal family.

An extremely sacred place is bound to produce extremely powerful blessings.

That must have been why, even though it was in the basement, the atmosphere was more solemn than gloomy.

The imagination and power of the Silver Sugar Viscount permeated the stone walls. It was as though they filled the hollow spire.

On top of the workbench sat a giant candy sculpture in progress.

It depicted an enormous lion, as tall as Hugh himself. The composition and expression were so daring that it could be seen as unsophisticated.

It was not very realistic and lacking in detail. But it wasn't crude, either. That much was clear from the overall artistry of the piece. The representation of the

lion's coat, like the swirling of stormy waters, made it seem as if the legendary beast had jumped out of a raging sea.

It was brimming with power. The sculpture attested to the skill of its creator.

Anne automatically approached the piece.

"Incredible. Such a powerful presence."

Hugh stood beside Anne.

"I suppose so. This sugar candy is for His Majesty's birthday celebration. It's got to look strong."

Anne looked up at Hugh with admiration in her eyes.

"Amazing. Compared with this, the stuff I make...it's cheap, child's play."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. Do you know why I brought you here, Anne?"

"Why?"

"Because you have the potential to become an amazing candy crafter. You can become a Silver Sugar Master, maybe even one of the best. I'm convinced of it, and I'm expecting great things from you. That's why I wanted to show you this place."

"I'm thrilled by your praise, but do you really think I can do that? I'm working hard, but..."

Hugh bent down and peered into Anne's face. His brown eyes, housing an unshakable will, reflected her features.

"I believe in you. Do you think I don't have a keen enough eye to see your potential?"

"I don't think that at all, but realistically—"

"Living alone as a fifteen-year-old girl must be difficult. You've still got Challe with you for the time being, but if he disappears, you might even find yourself in real danger. It will be awfully hard to polish your skills while living that sort of life. I bet you're using up all your energy just to survive day by day. I think that's a waste. Actually, I've been worried about you ever since the Royal Candy Fair. When I caught wind that you had come to Westol, I thought it was divine

providence and sought you out. I'd like to make a proposal, Anne."

"A proposal?"

"Stay here in this castle until you are awarded the royal medal at the Royal Candy Fair. During that time, I'll look after you. Then once you become a Silver Sugar Master, you can join the Mercury Workshop. You'll get to work as my assistant."

The details of Hugh's proposal slowly registered in Anne's mind.

To put it simply, Hugh was saying that he would offer Anne his unconditional support. Moreover, he would do so for as long as it took her to become a Silver Sugar Master, regardless of how many years that was.

That alone was surprising, but beyond that, he was even offering to secure her work as his assistant.

For Anne, there could be nothing better. The terms were so favorable, it was almost frightening.

Given Hugh's personality and social standing, it also didn't seem like he had any weird ulterior motives. He seemed to be purely interested in fostering Anne's natural talent as a candy crafter.

However, Anne suddenly recalled the opulent room that she had been in earlier.

If I grow accustomed to such luxury, I'll probably never want to leave as long as I live.

The thought made Anne shiver. Accepting Hugh's offer would mean the end of her desire to live a self-sufficient life. She would leave behind the daily, desperate struggle just to get by. She would exchange it for an easy life where she could focus on making sugar candy. That, too, was one way to live. But—

Would I choose that lifestyle? Relying not on my own capabilities, but the power of another?

It would be a frivolous existence, an unreliable way of life.

For fifteen years, she had wandered about the country with her mother. She knew of the hardships and difficulties of that lifestyle, as well as its joys. The

kind of life she would have with Hugh's support would be lacking something important.

"I'm incredibly grateful. Thank you, Hugh. But I'll have to decline."

"Why's that? Is something unsatisfactory?" Hugh asked gently.

"How can I put this...? I want to stand on my own two feet. If I lived like that without putting in the work to earn it, I'm sure I would grow terribly lazy. So when you asked me if something is unsatisfactory, I guess I could say I'm dissatisfied that there is nothing unsatisfactory."

When he heard that, Hugh stared at her in bewilderment. The next moment, he burst out laughing.

"Unbelievable! What an interesting character you are!"

Hugh stood back up and roared with laughter, rocking back and forth. As he cackled, he ruffled the hair on Anne's head.



What was that just now?

Challe tilted his head in confusion as Anne fled the room.

When he had found her straining her ear against the wall like a little kid, she had flushed and turned pale. Then the very next moment, she had suddenly dropped all expression, as if defeated.

As he was pondering Anne's strange behavior, she returned.

Anne came to an abrupt stop in the doorway. She looked surprised to see him.

"You're still here, Challe. Hugh said it would be time for dinner soon."

She seemed a little awkward, but Anne informed him about dinner with her usual smile. Then she walked over to the chair across from Challe and perched on the edge of the seat.

“Say, Challe. I’ve been thinking. How about we leave here tomorrow and go to Lewiston?”

“Lewiston?”

“Yeah. There are lots of Silver Sugar Masters running shops there, so normally the competition is fierce, right? That’s why we headed north and came to Westol. But Pure Soul Day is coming up, isn’t it? There’s a huge demand for sugar candy for the holiday, and since the population there is so high, supply can’t keep up with demand. That’s what Mama always used to say. If that’s the case, I’m thinking there’ll be plenty of people willing to buy their candy from a nameless candy crafter like myself.”

“If that’s a possibility, we should go. I’ll go anywhere.”

“Yay! All right, I’ll go talk to Mithril, too,” Anne said happily.

She got up from the chair and left the room.

She was acting no different from usual. Challe wondered if the strange behavior she’d shown earlier might have just been his imagination.

Challe also left Anne’s room and headed for his.

He opened the door to his room and stopped at the entrance. There was an intruder.

“Hey! You’re back!”

Hugh was relaxing in a chair. He raised a hand to Challe in greeting.

“Now, now, don’t be shy. Come on in. This is my castle, but you’re the master of this room for today, Challe.”

Thus instructed, the fairy entered, suspicious.

“What do you want?”

He crossed his arms and looked down at Hugh.

“I came to talk to you about something. About Anne. Will you hear me out?”

Challe prompted him to continue with a look.

Hugh continued, “The fact is, I was thinking I would look after Anne until she

became a Silver Sugar Master. I would have her stay here in the castle and polish her skills. Then once she becomes a Silver Sugar Master, I would like her to work as my assistant. I just discussed all this with Anne, but—”

“I don’t suppose she answered with ‘Yes, please.’”

If Anne were the sort of girl who would jump at that kind of proposal, she probably never would have met Challe in the first place. He couldn’t imagine her happily accepting that offer.

“You’re exactly right. She said she couldn’t live that kind of lifestyle if she didn’t earn it herself. I do want to respect her wishes. But the fact is that her circumstances are quite dire. Surely, you’ll admit that? As a fellow crafter, I would hate it if her talent was crushed because of this. That’s why I came to talk to you. To see if there was something we could do to get Anne to stay here.”

“Go find her if you want to persuade her.”

Challe jerked his chin in the direction of Anne’s room. But Hugh waved his hand in front of his face.

“Not a chance. There’s absolutely no way I’ll be able to convince her myself. That’s why I came to you. I thought she might agree if you weren’t around.”

Challe frowned at Hugh’s words.

“What do you mean?”

“Ultimately, Anne thinks she can try and make it on her own because you’re with her. Who knows what kind of danger would befall a fifteen-year-old girl traveling on her own? Anne has spent her whole life on the road, so she must be perfectly aware of that. She’s able to travel safely because you are by her side. So I was thinking that if you weren’t around, she might think about accepting my proposal.”

“Anne set off traveling alone before she ever met me. I’m sure she will continue, whether I’m there or not.”

“No. When humans lose something that they once had, you can’t expect them to return to how they were before they got it. The feelings of loss stay with them, and they grow timid,” Hugh sneered.

His grin told Challe that there was something smoldering deep in his heart.

“If she’s able to achieve her dreams because I’m with her, then I won’t leave her side,” Challe stated.

“I guess you feel an obligation to Anne since she gave you back your wing? That’s even more of a reason for you to disappear and make it easier for her to choose a safer lifestyle.”

“I don’t owe her anything. I just don’t have anything else to do. Which means I’m staying where I’m needed. That’s all.”

“I’m sure there are other people besides Anne who could use your abilities. Especially among your own kind, the fairies. There’s no need for you to remain hung up on this one human girl. Why are you so concerned with Anne?”

Why...?

Challe didn’t know how to answer.

After the Royal Candy Fair several months earlier, Challe had decided he would travel with Anne. As if under a spell cast by the scent of silver sugar coming from her fingertips, he had kissed her hand.

He couldn’t deny that he’d felt needed at the time. But he hadn’t been obliged to answer her call.

Yet Challe had decided to accompany her just the same. Now that he was trying to come up with a reason, he couldn’t say why.

He didn’t know himself. It was just what he had chosen to do at the time. That was all he could say.

Hugh pinned Challe down with his stare. The smoldering emotion in Hugh’s heart was transforming into clear anger. Why was he asking this? Challe felt it was outrageous.

“I don’t have to answer you. Get out.”

He pointed quietly to the door, and Hugh shrugged.

“I thought it would be easy to get you to agree, but I guess I underestimated you.”

Hugh blithely left the room. Challe scowled at the door.

He found the confusion he was feeling unpleasant.



The following day, Anne left Silver Westol Castle for Lewiston together with Challe and Mithril.

Along the way, they passed through a few small villages and sold a few sugar candies at low prices. They managed to find lodgings with the earnings.

Then, after three days, they arrived in the royal capital.

Lewiston was south of Westol. The weather was a bit warmer there, but still not mild enough that they could camp out.

They stayed at a cheap hotel called the Weather Vane, located on the outskirts of the capital. The next day, they set out for the largest of the three marketplaces in Lewiston, which was to the west of the royal castle.

The road, stretching out from the western gate of the castle, was the second widest in the whole capital.

On both sides of the avenue were shops with narrow frontages. They were crowded together so closely that the awnings over their doors butted up against one another.

During the day, rows of tents made of cloth varnished with animal fat were set up across from the stores. People moved from shop to tent and tent to shop, threading their way through the gaps as they browsed.

The street was filled with the shrill voices of vendors, angry voices, arguing voices exchanging jokes, and laughter. Together, they all created a cacophony.

This was the Lewiston West Marketplace, said to be the most bustling place in the kingdom.

Farther away from the west gate of the castle, where the line of shops had

largely tapered out, Anne had set up a small table in front of her wagon and covered it with a white sheet. Atop it, Anne had arranged five of her sugar candy creations. Mithril sat cross-legged beside the candy.

On the side of her wagon, Anne had hung a wooden plank that she had gotten from the lumber mill. On the signboard she had painted *Sugar Candy—Accepting Commissions*.

Customers came in a slow trickle. Most of them looked dubious when they saw that the person making the sugar candy and tending shop was a scrawny young girl.

Anne just stood there, vacantly watching groups of people pass in front of her.

This was her second day doing this. The day before, only five customers had said they would consider placing orders.

She had yet to receive any actual candy commissions.

“I even went to the trouble of paying the five-bayn fee to the marketplace association, but...”

As she spoke, Anne looked down at the dress she was wearing and thought about how she appeared to the customers.

“I guess I won’t get anywhere unless I look a little more grown up, huh? Maybe I should put on Mama’s dress or something.”

“If you need an adult, get Challe Fenn Challe to stand here! Put that lazybones to work!”

Mithril looked up at Anne enthusiastically.

“I’m not sure about that. If I did, I just know someone would say something stupid, like ask me to sell them Challe instead of candy.”

Challe was lying down on the driver’s seat. It was his secret to success. He did it as often as he could in places where there were many people to avoid their stares.

“Excuse me, miss. You made this candy?”

A man who had been passing by suddenly stopped in front of the table of Anne's candy sculptures.

"Ah, yes. That's right."

"They're quite well-made. How much do you charge?"

She could tell from his tone that the man was not just browsing. Anne's spirits lifted.

"Something similar to the ones here would be fifty bayn. One size larger is one cress."

"Do you have an example of a piece in the larger size?"

"Yes. I have one inside the wagon. I'll bring it out right away!" Anne said.

She had just turned around to head for the door of the cargo hold of her wagon, when—

"Hey, over there. That girl. Isn't she the one from the candy fair?"

Anne heard the voice of a young man nearby. When she looked in the direction of the voice, a group of five or six men who looked like tradesmen were pointing at her. There was one familiar face among the group.

".....Uh.....Jonas?"

For a moment, she thought it was just a coincidental resemblance. Jonas seemed to have been drinking, and his face was very red. Maybe because of that, his gentle, well-bred features seemed lax, and he didn't look like himself.

"Hey, Jonas. That's her, right?" asked one of his companions. "The one from the Royal Candy Fair?"

Jonas's drowsy-looking blue eyes focused on Anne's face. "Oh, what's this? Mm-hmm, that's her."

When their eyes met, Jonas smiled and patted the young man next to him on the shoulder.

"No question about it. This girl is Anne."

"Wow, so that is her."

“Master Jonas! Please, it would be best for you not to have anything to do with a girl like her!”

A shrill voice came from behind Jonas’s back.

“Let’s go over there. Hey, Master Jonas! Master Jonas!”

Tugging desperately at the hem of his pants was his worker fairy, Cathy. Anne made eye contact with her. When she did, Cathy glared back sharply, as if Anne had done something wrong.

“Master Jonas!”

“Ugh, she’s so annoying,” one of Jonas’s companions said. “Jonas, shut her up. She’s your fairy, right?”

“Cathy! Shut up!” Jonas barked. “Do you want to get punished?”

At that, Cathy bit her lip and let go of his hem.

The group of young men approached Anne’s wagon, smirking and reeking of alcohol. When they did, the customer who had expressed interest in Anne’s sugar candies grew frightened and hurried away.

“Ah...wait, please...”

Anne tried to call out to the customer who was leaving. But one of the young men stood in the way to block her.

Mithril stood up, burning with rage. “What the hell is your problem?! I’ll take you on!”

The young men frowned, looking annoyed.

“I’m the one you’re after, Jonas!” Anne rushed to step in front of the table to protect Mithril. “Are you drinking in the middle of the day, Jonas?” she accused. “Aren’t you supposed to be training?”

“Training? Of course I am. I’m just taking a break today is all. My training is so strict, you know. They’re working me extremely hard, thanks to you screwing me over at the Royal Candy Fair.”

Anne was indignant at his words. “When did I screw you over? You’re the one who tried to pull a dirty trick!”

About two months earlier, right before the Royal Candy Fair, the young man in front of her, Jonas, had stolen the candy sculpture she had planned to enter in the fair. Ultimately, because of his actions, he had essentially lost any chance of becoming a Silver Sugar Master.

“You’re not gonna let her talk to you like that, are you, Jonas?”

The young men had formed a circle around Anne and were slowly closing in on her.

“As craftsmen in the Radcliffe Workshop with Jonas, we can’t stay silent about this.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” asked a frigid voice from somewhere behind the male candy crafters.

The men seemed startled by the menacing inquiry and turned around to see Challe standing there. He shoved through them without any difficulty, as if he were pushing his way through tall weeds, and took a position beside Anne.

“I asked what you’re going to do about it.”

“What did you say, you...?” one of the young men grumbled. But he didn’t have the courage to pick a fight. He just scowled at Challe.

The people walking by took notice of the dangerous aura around the young men, and of Challe. One after another, they stopped and stared.

Before long, a crowd had formed. Jonas noticed and glanced around.

“We’re not going to do anything, are we, boys? We’re upstanding candy crafters, after all. We just wanted to let the fine people of this city know there’s a fraudster in our midst!”

Jonas smiled, pandering to the onlookers.

“We couldn’t just stand by and let all you folks get cheated, could we? Your dead will never rest in peace if you give them Pure Soul Day candies made by this corrupt crafter.”



“Knock it off! That’s completely unfounded! I’m not a fraud or corrupt!” Anne shouted. She wouldn’t stand for his verbal attacks.

Jonas looked at her with exaggerated astonishment.

“It’s not unfounded at all,” he said. “I’m sure some of you in this crowd must remember seeing this girl’s face before. She’s the girl who was called up before the king two months ago, at the Royal Candy Fair.”

When he posed the question, onlookers here and there nodded in sudden recognition.

“You do remember, don’t you? And while we’re at it, I wonder if some of you might remember my face as well. I was also one of the people summoned before the king.”

Jonas continued, watching the crowd’s reaction.

“Ladies and gentlemen, didn’t you think it was strange? Why would her sugar candy sculpture, so small you could hardly tell what it was from where you stood in the crowd, get an audience with the king? The answer is simple: It’s because she seduced the Silver Sugar Viscount and secured his endorsement. His Majesty listened to the Viscount’s words and called this girl up before him. But he obviously found her sculpture undeserving of the royal medal. And the other piece that was there...truthfully, it was my entry. My work was supposed to be awarded the royal medal. But this girl claimed to have made that candy sculpture as well and sowed confusion. His Majesty took offense and ultimately left without selecting anyone to become a Silver Sugar Master.”

At first, Anne was dumbfounded. Then she flared up in anger.

“That’s all lies!!”

“Where’s the lie?”

One of the onlookers said, “I went to watch the candy fair. It looked to me like things went pretty much as that young man just explained.”

In response, several more voices agreed, “They sure did.”

Watching from afar, the spectators wouldn’t have been able to hear the conversation that had taken place at the king’s tent. Things very well might

have seemed to go the way Jonas, with malicious intent, had just explained.

As soon as she realized that, Anne felt a surge of frustration. She was seeing red. She felt like crying.

The young men were looking at Anne with sneering grins. Jonas was smirking, too.

I can't cry. If I cry, I lose. And if I admit defeat, everyone will think that's what really happened.

"His Majesty the king said he liked my candy. That's the truth."

Anne said only that, then started picking up the sugar candies on the table, placing them in a wooden crate by her feet. Mithril saw what she was doing and jumped down from the table, then quickly cleared away the white sheet. Anne put the sheet that Mithril had gathered on top of the crate and picked it up.

"Oh, what are you doing, Anne?"

Anne gave a clipped answer to Jonas's smarmy question.

"Someone's being a real nuisance, so I'm closing up shop for the day. Out of my way!"

"You're running away?" Jonas laughed, taking a few exaggerated steps out of her path.

Anne clenched her teeth as she passed through the group of men and headed for her wagon.

"Going to cry to the Silver Sugar Viscount again?"

"The Viscount's got some funny tastes! Imagine getting it on with a shrimp like her."

"Or maybe she gives it to him so good, we don't even have any idea!"

The young men cackled and jeered at Anne as she went to place the crate in her wagon.

Anne had no desire to respond to their mockery. She endured the jeers with a stoic expression. She knew that the more of a fuss she made, the happier it would make the men. Things would get even messier, and she would be playing

right into their hands.

“Silence.”

The crowd tensed up.

At some point, Challe had summoned his sword. He pointed the tip toward the young men.

“I will permit nothing further.”

Both the spectators and the young men gasped. Challe’s black eyes harbored such anger that it seemed he might attack at any moment.

Anne was surprised, but more than that, she felt pathetic. She was ashamed of her cowardliness and how it had forced Challe to act that way.

“It’s all right, Challe. Stop. Put your sword away. You’ll get arrested if you hurt people, no matter what the circumstances may be.”

But the fairy didn’t move. His gaze remained fixed on the male crafters, as if he was calculating the best time to attack. The young men balked at the sight of Challe’s blade.

“Please.”

When he heard Anne’s pleading voice, Mithril jumped up. He landed on Challe’s shoulder and whispered, “Anne’s asking you to stand down. I get how you feel, but you need to withdraw your sword, Challe Fenn Challe.”

Then Mithril rubbed at his eyes with the palms of his hands. Challe glanced over at Mithril and slowly lowered his sword. The weapon in his hand dissolved into beads of light and gradually disappeared.

“She’s not crying. Don’t you start.”

That was all Challe said, then he turned his back to the young men. He walked around to the rear of the cargo hold and helped Anne load the crate. She turned to Challe and Mithril and smiled.

“Thank you. Both of you.”

Anne put the display table into her wagon and took down her wooden sign. Then she got up onto the driver’s seat.

The male candy crafters were roaring with derisive laughter, as if elated with their triumph. Anne ignored them, whipped her horse, and left the marketplace. She rode straight back to the Weather Vane.

The hotel had a rusty metal weather vane standing on top of its reddish-brown roof.

The rooms were cheap, and the building was old. But the proprietor was a plump, good-natured woman, and Anne felt at ease staying there. Even so, considering the state of her finances, she could only stay for two more nights.

The three of them entered the inn without speaking.

They came across the proprietor in the restaurant on the first floor, busily tidying up the tables.

That morning, Anne had announced to the innkeeper, "Today's the day I'll find work!" before leaving in high spirits. The woman seemed surprised to see her come back in the early afternoon, looking so dejected.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? Did you find a job?"

"It was no use. There weren't very many customers to begin with, and on top of that, I got harassed."

Anne slid despondently into a nearby chair. Then she abruptly collapsed face-first onto the table.

The innkeeper was taken aback.

"What happened?!"

"Grrr, I'm so annoyed!! What the hell, those guys were the worst!! I can't believe Jonas was hanging out with jerks like that and drinking, to boot! He's becoming more and more of a good-for-nothing, isn't he?! Argh, I just can't stand him! I'm going to become a wizard's apprentice and cast a curse on him!!"

Suddenly, Anne looked up.

"Ma'am! You don't happen to know any wizards, do you?!"

A short while before, Anne had truly felt vexed. Jonas's frustrating words had

nearly driven her to tears.

However, once she settled down, she'd realized there was no need to cry. There was no reason to feel down when his false accusations were completely unfounded. She could let her pure rage seethe within her and be as angry as she wanted to be.

Both Challe and Mithril were relieved to see the fire in Anne's eyes.

"Unfortunately, I'm not acquainted with any wizards...but what on Earth happened?"

As surprised as she was, the innkeeper responded with sincerity.

"Some candy crafters. I think they were probably members of the Radcliffe Workshop. They harassed me! They were drunk in the middle of the day and seemed to be in a good mood. Why did they have to come and bully me when I couldn't even sell any candies?!"

"Those guys sound like the group that was drinking here until just a little while ago. They said they were gathering their courage and put down quite a lot of liquor."

The innkeeper pointed at the messy tables. Then she grinned at Anne.

"I may not know any wizards, but if you want some juicy info, I'll tell you."

She took a seat across from Anne, who blinked in surprise.

"Why do you think the boys from the Radcliffe Workshop needed to steel themselves?"

"...I'm not sure."

"You know how in Rockwell Province, which borders Harrington Province to the south, there's that harbor city named Philax under the direct control of the royal family? Well, the governor of that city is the Duke of Philax. He's said to be the last seed of conflict in the kingdom, a live coal who could ignite a civil war at any moment, but his noble lineage is indisputable."

"If I remember correctly, the Duke of Philax is the head of the Alburn line, descended from King Cedric. That would certainly make him nobility. The same bloodline as His Majesty."

In Highland, there is a legend about King Cedric, the hero who fought against the fairy king and led the humans to victory. He had three sons, and each one founded a noble house.

House Millsland, House Chamber, and House Alburn.

Each region was once ruled by a feudal lord, and Highland was a land of warring states. The country was unified a century ago when the three families descended from King Cedric formed an alliance, resulting in a merger of the smaller states.

The first to serve as the king of Highland was King Aaron of House Millsland.

The other two families, House Alburn and House Chamber, were formally declared vassals to the Millsland line.

The current monarch of Highland is Edmond II of House Millsland.

In short, House Alburn came from the same family lineage as House Millsland, which had produced the reigning king. That was why the Duke of Philax possessed a noble bloodline of equal standing to that of the royal family, and why he was called the last seed of conflict in the kingdom.

“That’s right. And word is that the duke is looking for candy crafters. The announcement went something along the lines of, ‘We are recruiting outstanding candy crafters, regardless of whether they are Silver Sugar Masters or not. Candidates will stay at Philax Castle, and anyone who is able to make a single sugar candy that pleases the duke will be paid one thousand cress for it.’”

“A thousand cress for a single piece of candy?!”

“Yeah, it’s absurd, right? But any candy crafter who earns the approval of the Duke of Philax, a descendent of King Cedric, stands to gain great prestige. It sounded like the crafters from the Radcliffe Workshop are headed to Philax for the money and glory of the duke’s approval. They held that drinking party to get fired up about it.”

Closing an eye, the innkeeper continued, “I bet if you go to Philax, you can knock those guys out of the running and get your hands on that money.”

If Anne had a thousand cress, her current financial situation would instantly

improve. This could be an easy win that would enable her to stay at the Weather Vane through the New Year.

Not to mention, she would gain the glory of having her skills recognized by the Duke of Philax. Since Anne wasn't a Silver Sugar Master, this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. If she was awarded such a distinction, she would surely have no trouble selling her sugar candies.

Anne's chances were better than nothing. In any case, the Duke of Philax had expressly stated that he didn't care whether someone was a Silver Sugar Master or not. There was no question that he would be letting skill decide victory or defeat.

"What do you think? Challe? Mithril?"

Mithril was standing on top of the table, staring blankly into space. Maybe he was imagining the ten pieces of gold, worth a hundred cress each.

"A thousand cress. That'd be nice. Honestly, we could work ourselves to the bone and still never earn that much. A thousand cress... A thousand, huh...?"

As a matter of fact, Anne had recently learned that Mithril loved gold.

Next, she directed her gaze toward Challe, who shrugged and quipped, "It seems more constructive than becoming a wizard's apprentice."

Right. I am a candy crafter. So I will secure victory with my sugar candy.

Anne clenched her fist.

Chapter 3

CASTLE BY THE SEA

The capital of Rockwell Province is Hielburg. And the current governor, the Earl of Richards, is known to be a sworn ally of the Earl of Downing.

Rockwell Province is bordered by the ocean. Its port has been important since antiquity, and it has historically flourished through trade with the continental mainland.

And the port city of Philax serves as the gateway of that trade.

Philax is under the direct jurisdiction of the royal family. In addition to its being the site of a military base, this gives the nobles a monopoly on the wealth gained through international commerce. It also means that the governor of the city is chosen by the crown. The governor is always a relative of the royal family and is granted an appropriate title that includes the region name.

The man holding the title of the Duke of Philax was William Alburn.

And he was recruiting candy crafters.

“What was that saying...? ‘The wealthy settle down while the poor wander forever’?” Anne muttered to herself as she steered the horse from the driver’s seat.

Mithril, sitting between Anne and Challe, looked up at her and tilted his head in confusion. “What’s that?”

“A proverb from the people who live on the distant continent. Or something like that anyway. I heard it a long time ago.”

“And it means?” Challe asked, prompting her for more.

“Nothing special, it’s just... I’m always on the move, you know? I guess it just hits home.”

“Certainly, you do wander about,” Challe immediately affirmed.

“And you’re definitely broke!” Mithril loudly added.

Anne knew the fairies were right, and they weren’t trying to make her feel bad, but she still felt glum.

“I know... I’m one of the wandering poor... Putting it in a proverb makes it sound kind of cool, but in plain words, it’s anything but, huh?”

Anne and the fairies had set off the day after she heard about the Duke of Philax from the innkeeper at the Weather Vane.

It would take a day and a half to get from Lewiston to Philax. They had stayed overnight in a farmer’s barn along the highway. The next morning, they had set off in the horse-drawn wagon at daybreak.

Thanks to their early start, they arrived in Philax before noon. The city spread out before them, following the gentle arc of the bay. Redbrick houses were clustered together along the coast.

“Whatever. I like traveling, so I don’t mind. But I would like it if I could at least spend the end of the year hunkered down somewhere warm, you know? I’ve got to do something to make that happen.”

Ahead, Anne could see Philax Castle.

The castle stood on a small peninsula that jutted out into the sea on the eastern end of the bay. It was enormous and built to look imposing.

It was about three times the size of Silver Westol Castle and had a defensive wall with parapets on top. The towering keep, the watchtowers, and even the gates did not have the slightest bit of decorative design. It looked like a fortress.

Anne could tell at first glance that the castle had been standing for a long time, and that it had survived many battles.

Since the structure had been built on the tip of a peninsula, it did not have a

moat. The polished castle walls occasionally caught the sunlight reflecting off the sea; the shiny, mottled blue light dancing on its surface was mismatched with its forbidding form.

Anne drove her wagon up to the imposing castle gate.

The entrance was open. Anne announced her occupation and her purpose to the guard keeping watch.

“Do you have a piece of sugar candy that you have made?” the guard asked. When she replied that she did, he peeked into her cargo hold to check.

As soon as the guard saw that she had sugar candy, Anne was quickly allowed to pass through.

She was certain that other candy crafters had been arriving from all over the country, answering the duke’s call for sugar artisans. She didn’t want to be caught empty-handed when meeting the Duke of Philax.

It made sense. The duke couldn’t allow every single crafter who arrived at his castle to stay and make candy there. Only the candy artisans who clearly showed a certain amount of promise would be granted the chance. To demonstrate eligibility, one would have to bring an example of their work.

Anne was instructed to leave her wagon in the outer keep of the castle. Challe and Mithril had to wait with the carriage.

Alone, Anne proceeded forward with her sugar candy in hand. A soldier led her into the inner keep and toward the castle tower.

Then she was shown to a small waiting room, which seemed to continue to a reception hall.

There was already someone there, a single man who looked like a candy crafter. The miserable-looking fellow didn’t say one word to Anne.

Before long, a door on the opposite side of the room opened quietly.

A young boy in a page’s uniform appeared. He announced to the two, “Please bring your candies this way.”

The reception hall, like the exterior of the castle, had a rustic air to it. The arrangement of the stones was plainly visible on the surface of the wall.

The walls were not plastered like they were in Silver Westol Castle. But the very positioning of the stones told of the history of the place. It was not shabby by any means. Rather, it seemed like its proprietor took pride in its simplicity.

At the very end of the reception hall was a raised platform, behind which hung a finely woven tapestry. In front of the tapestry was an imposing chair like a throne, and before it was a woolen cloth spread out on the floor. It seemed like they were to kneel there and wait.

“The Duke of Philax will see you soon,” the page announced before withdrawing to the side of the hall. Anne knelt on top of the woolen cloth.

The air was damp at the floor level. Neither of the large fireplaces, one at each end of the reception hall, was lit.

Anne felt lonely in the chilly space and glanced around restlessly at her surroundings.

As she was looking around, she got an uncomfortable feeling.

Something is off about this castle. What could it be? What feels wrong? It's somehow different from Hugh's castle and from the city.

“H-hey!! You!” the man kneeling beside Anne whispered to her. He sounded panicked.

“Huh...? Me?”

Anne looked in the man's direction. He was hanging his head. She tilted her head, confused as to what could be the matter.

“There is no need to bow.”

A voice came from above. Startled, Anne looked forward.

A young man was sitting on the throne before her. Despite having surveyed her surroundings, she had not noticed him when he had quietly entered the room. The fellow next to her had been trying to alert her to his presence.

She had been told there was no need to bow, but Anne hadn't been doing that to begin with. All she'd done was turn pale and stare at the young man before her. But he didn't appear bothered by her rudeness.

The man did not strike her as magnanimous; he seemed more indifferent than anything else, really. Anne couldn't find anything resembling emotion in his deep-green eyes.

He looked to be about in his late twenties. His pale-blond hair was neatly coiffed. His simple tunic had exquisite embroidery and looked clean yet elegant. His overall presence seemed gentle.

Except he was cold. Anne could sense that from his eyes, which betrayed absolutely no emotion.

"I am Duke Alburn of Philax."

His voice was devoid of inflection.

Anne was a commoner, so she wasn't that knowledgeable about the politics of the kingdom. Nonetheless, she did know the name and standing of the Duke of Philax. His was such a famous story that anyone who lived in the Kingdom of Highland knew about it.

Everyone was aware that the Alburn family was the last seed of conflict in the kingdom.

Three great houses had been started by the three sons of King Cedric, the hero who had fought the fairy king and led the humans to victory.

The Millslands, the Chambers, and the Alburns.

When Highland was unified a century ago, House Millsland had ascended to the throne. The other two houses had become retainers to it. But House Chamber and House Alburn owned enormous swaths of territory, so the authority of House Millsland did not extend to their domains.

Two extraterritorial regions had persisted within the Kingdom of Highland.

That state of affairs had become a point of conflict fifteen years earlier.

When the previous king, Edmond I, passed away, his successor, Edmond II, was only twelve years old.

The head of House Chamber at the time, Stuart, was an ambitious person.

"A twelve-year-old monarch is far too unreliable. The three houses originate

from the same bloodline. So shouldn't someone better suited to be king step forward from among the three families?"

Stuart insisted upon it, and the nobles who were uneasy with the idea of such a young king supported the idea.

That was the start of a civil war, known as the Chamber Rebellion.

The war ultimately ended in victory for House Millsland.

House Chamber was eradicated and every member put to death, even the infants. The family tree was cut down.

After the civil war, the leading figure to arrange a solid government system under centralized rule was the Earl of Downing, who had been a canny politician since the reign of the previous monarch.

Of the three great houses, only one truly remained.

The Alburn family had supported House Millsland during the rebellion. However, the Earl of Downing had insisted that one country could not have two rulers, so he had the Alburns stripped of their landholdings. Their private armies were dissolved, and only a few knights had remained with them as guards. The head of the Alburn family was also made to live in Philax as governor.

The Alburns had been treated very poorly. But the Earl of Downing is said to have counseled Edmond II to take even more drastic measures.

He wanted Edmond to exile the head of House Alburn.

The earl asserted that blood relations might become a spark for conflict at any time. Even if the Alburns themselves weren't so inclined, there was a possibility that treacherous retainers might try to elevate them to power. He emphasized that it was the right time to sever ties, as sad as that might be.

The head of House Alburn at the time had been Thomas, the father of current Duke of Philax, William.

Thomas is said to have been a very peaceful and intellectual man.

Edmond II adored him. For that reason alone, Edmond ignored the Earl of Downing's proposition and refused to exile Thomas.

Instead, he imposed two obligations on House Alburn.

The first was to remit all the trade taxes collected in Philax to the crown. Only a set percentage of that money would be given to the Alburn family. It was humiliating, akin to receiving table scraps from the king.

The second obligation was for the head of House Alburn to journey to the royal capital, Lewiston, once a month and address the king. This was intended as a constant affirmation of the house's continued loyalty.

When Thomas's son, William, succeeded him as the head of House Alburn, he continued to solemnly perform those duties.

Regardless of how Edmond II felt, however, the retainers who served House Millsland were still eager for an excuse to consign House Alburn to oblivion. The Earl of Downing was said to be at the forefront of that movement.

Anne had met the Earl of Downing before. She had gotten the strong impression that he was an agreeable old man. She had expected the Duke of Philax to be a fiercer-looking character, given that the Earl of Downing was looking for a chance to obliterate him. Contrary to what she had imagined, the young man before her was very calm.

However, he did have a strange coldness about him.

"Show me the sugar candies that these two brought with them."

At his order, the page took the sugar candies from the hands of Anne and the other man. Then he held them out in front of Duke Alburn.

The duke glanced back and forth between the two that the page presented in his left and right hands, and picked up the candy that Anne had made. Then he announced, "The man may leave. The girl will stay where she is."

The other candy crafter looked stunned by the abrupt ruling. The page gave him back his candy and politely urged him to leave. The man seemed reluctant to go and kept turning to look over his shoulder as he went.

Duke Alburn stared fixedly at Anne's candy in his hand.

It was a sculpture of Mithril that she had made to amuse herself. The fairy had refused to eat it despite her insistence, saying it was too much like cannibalism.

Anne had been disappointed at the time, because she'd thought it was a particularly good piece.

Anne and Duke Alburn were left alone in the huge hall, facing each other.

The room felt even colder than before.

"Why did you make this?" Duke Alburn asked suddenly.

"That model is of one of my friends, who is traveling with me. I thought I would make him a candy and give it to him."

"This is a fairy, is it?"

"Yes."

"Very good."

Duke Alburn slowly stood up, came down from his platform, and walked over to Anne. He held the sugar candy out to her and gave a look that told her to take it. Once she took it back, Duke Alburn announced, "I give you permission to stay at the castle. Make sugar candy. A candy sculpture that satisfies my desires."

"What sort of things should I make?"

Duke Alburn suddenly straightened up and walked behind Anne.

Anne remained kneeling but turned around, following his movements with her eyes. He headed for the wall opposite where he had been sitting.

A large piece of cloth hung from the wall. It looked like a curtain, and beside it was a decorative cord, which seemed to be used for opening and closing the curtain. But behind that wall was a corridor. There couldn't be a window there.

Without hesitation, Alburn pulled the cord.

The curtain slid open to reveal a single portrait.

"Wow...beautiful!" Anne said thoughtlessly, forgetting she was in the presence of a noble.

It was a portrait of a young woman. It looked life-sized, just a little bit shorter than Duke Alburn. Pale skin. Silver eyes with a mysterious shine. Straight, flowing hair that was pale-blue like shallow water. The woman had handsome

features and a striking expression. She wore a slightly sad smile.

But what caught Anne's eye the most was what was on her back.

"Two wings... She's a fairy, isn't she?" Anne asked without thinking.

Duke Alburn nodded. "I want you to sculpt the fairy depicted in this portrait. Are you up to the task?"

I can—something like confidence was born inside Anne.

She felt a stirring in her chest. It was the desire to capture the beauty of something so lovely in a sugar candy. She knew that the urge would grow greater bit by bit as she earnestly confronted her work.

"I am."

Duke Alburn closed the curtain and returned to his chair. "There is a workshop for the crafters in the inner wards of the castle. Make your sugar candy there. I will have someone show you the way. If you want to examine your subject, there are many paintings depicting the same fairy within the East Tower of the outer ward. Go look at those," he explained matter-of-factly.

"All right."

Anne nodded and looked at Duke Alburn. As before, she couldn't get a read on his emotions. It was as if something was missing from his eyes. He was talking to Anne and staring right at her. Yet he wasn't truly perceiving her; rather, he was indifferent to her existence. She shuddered a little.

Once Duke Alburn left, a young man who gave his name as Dale appeared in his place to act as her guide. He said he was Duke Alburn's valet. He had a bundle of keys attached to the belt around his waist. The keys jangled loudly as he walked.

Challe and Mithril had also been given permission to stay. Apparently, when Dale had confirmed this with Duke Alburn, the duke had said it would not be a problem.

The castle was right on the very tip of the peninsula. The sound of breaking waves could always be heard without pause. A salty breeze constantly swirled above the ramparts, and when Anne looked up, she could see seabirds leisurely

circling in the sky.

Anne and the fairies were shown to the castle's inner courtyard.

There the space opened up into a broad plaza. A series of simple row houses lined the castle walls that encircled the courtyard. Those were the rooms provided for the candy crafters, which doubled as their work spaces. The majority were two-story wooden buildings with shingled roofs.

In the very back of the inner courtyard stood two towers. Beyond them was a dead end, as the spires were at the very edge of the castle's boundaries.

The tower to the east was supposed to be decorated with portraits of the fairy.

"How many candy crafters are here now?"

When Anne asked this of Dale, who was walking in front of her, he turned around and answered.

"Including you, there are six right now."

"That's all?"

"Every day one or two come in, but at the same time, every day two or three are dismissed."

"That many?"

"Yes. The duke views all the candies as soon as they are completed. The majority of the crafters are sent away at that point."

"And not even one of the candy crafters have made a sculpture that satisfied him?"

"If there were, the duke would have already stopped gathering candy crafters."

"I guess that's true. But what does the duke want this sugar candy for? Some kind of celebration, or a festival?"

Dale answered her question stoically. "You'll have to ask the duke yourself. We don't know since we follow his wishes without question. We retainers have sworn our loyalty to House Alburn since the time of the duke's father, you see.

We do not serve House Millsland; we work for House Alburn.”

Anne was surprised by Dale’s assertion. Everyone living in the Kingdom of Highland, noble or commoner, was supposed to recognize the authority of the king of Highland. Even the retainers serving their respective nobles ultimately answered to the monarch reigning over them.

Yet Dale had declared that he was not a servant of the king’s family, House Millsland.

Ordinarily, those words would be regarded as treasonous.

Yet when it came to House Alburn, they were apparently permitted. If not, the valet would never have been so careless as to tell that to an unfamiliar candy crafter.

Anne felt she’d gotten a glimpse of why House Alburn was said to be the last seed of conflict in the kingdom.

“You must feel proud to work for House Alburn.”

“Of course I do. By the way—” Dale looked at Challe, walking by Anne’s side, and Mithril, sitting smartly on her shoulder. “You own two fairies? What a luxury!”

“They are my friends. I do not own them; they are just traveling with me.”

People often made that comment, so she responded with a hint of exasperation in her voice.

When she did, Dale nodded in sudden understanding. “Ah, so that’s why the duke gave you permission, even though you had two with you.”

“What does that mean?”

“The duke hates the idea of using fairies. There’s not a single one working in this castle. However, he accepts that candy crafters inevitably employ them, so he permits them to bring one worker fairy apiece. That’s why I thought it was strange when the duke said it was no problem that you were accompanied by two.”

“Oh, I see! No fairies. That’s why—”

Now she understood why she'd felt something was out of place, a feeling that had persisted as they walked through the plaza.

The castle was devoid of fairies. In other cities and manors, in inns and shops, there had always been fairies everywhere Anne had gone. But since entering the castle, she hadn't seen a single one.

Dale came to a stop in front of a row house standing against the eastern wall of the castle.

"All right, then, this building is for you. Five young crafters from the Radcliffe Workshop have been staying in the one next door since yesterday. Try to get along."

Anne let out a little sigh when she heard that there were crafters from the Radcliffe Workshop there. They had to be Jonas and his buddies.

"Sure. I'll get along with them the best I can."

Dale left, so Anne went into her row house.

The interior was pleasant. It had a wooden floor, so it wasn't penetratingly cold. When she went up a simple set of stairs, built without kickboards, she found that there were five beds lined up in a row on the second floor.

The building seemed to be a vestige of wartime. A place where long ago, during the war, artisans and technicians—sometimes even livestock and farmers—would have been quartered.

The guards lived in barracks in the central castle keep, which meant that there wasn't anyone living in the houses in the inner courtyard at present. Because of that, there were no signs of human activity, and the place had a lonely atmosphere.

"So I need to make a sugar candy modeled on the fairy depicted in that portrait," Anne explained as she carried her things from the cargo hold of her wagon into the row house.

Challe and Mithril were also helping her with the luggage.

"She was a really beautiful fairy."

"But did you memorize the picture after only seeing it once?" Mithril asked as

he carried in the cooking pot.

“The duke said there are several paintings of the same fairy decorating the East Tower over there. Do you two want to come with me to look at them once we’re done carrying in these things?”

“No way, I’m tired. And we’ve got beds for once, so I’m taking a nap.”

Mithril set the pot down near the hearth and yawned. Then he bounced up the stairs, humming on his way to the second floor. They had slept in a barn the night before, and he seemed happy to have a bed for a change.

Anne was certain that she was the only one interested in seeing those portraits, since they were important for her work.

“You too, Challe...?”

Challe set down what he was carrying and jerked his chin in Anne’s direction.

“Let’s go.”

“Huh?! You’ll tag along?”

“You’re the one who invited me, so why are you surprised?”

“I mean, I just didn’t expect you to go with me.”

Challe looked a little displeased to hear her say that.

“I’m just curious.”

“Why?” Anne quickly replied. “Why are you interested?”

But Challe ignored her. He promptly exited the row house.

“Ah! Wait, Challe!”

“Hurry up.”

Challe began to stride away, and as she was chasing after him, Anne realized something. There was no way that he was interested in seeing some paintings. He was simply accompanying her. The thought made her happy.

When she caught up to him, she look up at Challe and flashed him a smile.

Challe glanced down at Anne and said bluntly, “You’re making a dumb face.”

“I don’t care. I’m happy.”

Anne didn’t even mind Challe’s words of abuse.

They headed straight for the East Tower.

From the direction of the tower came five young men walking in a group. Anne froze.

It’s Jonas. And I remember seeing the other guys, too.

Anne’s rage was revived when she saw them coming. But it did not end with simple anger. Her growing rage slowly hardened into resolve. By the time the men got close enough that she could see their faces clearly, Anne was eager to confront them.

The men were laughing together as they walked. However, as soon as they realized there were people walking toward them and that those people were Anne and Challe, each of them stared with his mouth gaping open.

Anne was so calm she surprised even herself. “Jonas! What a coincidence,” she said in a cheerful voice.

Jonas made a face like he had seen something terrifying. “Wh-why are you here, Anne? Did you follow me? Don’t tell me you’re here for revenge!”

“Not that I think anyone would blame me if I was, but I don’t have that kind of free time.” Anne stuck out her tongue childishly and walked past them.

“Why the hell did you come here?!” one of the young men shouted at her.

Anne stopped in her tracks. She glared back at them sternly. “I’m here because somebody totally trashed my reputation as a candy crafter in front of the whole world. So I answered the call from the Duke of Philax to clear my name.”

Then she declared, “If it’s a contest of true ability, I won’t lose.”

The men’s faces were bright red with anger, but at the same time, there was enormous anxiety in their eyes.

Each one of them must have assumed Duke Alburn had deemed them worthy. Anne had no doubt that they all had secretly sworn to gain glory for themselves,

regardless of whether their companions were defeated. But now the men were looking at a new and capable rival. They couldn't hide their agitation.

This was a place where true ability would win the day. Even they should have known that. It wouldn't be as easy as ganging up on her in the middle of town and harassing her.

Anne saw straight through them, saw their fear, and felt foolish for getting upset.

"Well, let's all just do our best."

That was all she said before walking off toward the East Tower with Challe.

Challe snorted with laughter. "You sure are confident," he remarked.

"It was eighty percent bluffing. I mean, I don't want to lose. As you know, there's a thousand cress on the line. That kind of money would really set me up for an incredible New Year, and you and Mithril, too."

The following day, Anne set about her work.

The first thing she had to do was decide on the size of her sculpture. Sugar candy sculptures used for celebrations were typically quite large, about half her height. Taking into consideration that she was making the sculpture at the request of a duke, she figured bigger was better.

The portraits of the fairy hanging in the East Tower all had a similar composition. The subject was sitting in some and standing in others. Nearly every portrait was painted in light blues. It gave the impression that she was as graceful as flowing water. Anne took that impression seriously.

She decided to sculpt the fairy in a standing pose with both arms reaching gently out in front of her, and that she would avoid modeling the fairy's face too closely. She thought the subject of the painting would end up looking eerily lifelike if she tried making the face too detailed.

Anne instead prioritized capturing the overall impression of the fairy.

She placed the stone slab she used for working on top of a table that was already on the first floor of her row house. Once she arranged her spatulas and rulers around it, the top of the table was full. She set up her vials of colored

powder and her cold water bowls on the floor.

Mithril proved an unexpected boon while Anne was working. He drew cold water from the well and brought it to her, scooped up silver sugar from the barrels, and handed her colored powders. They were little things, but they were enough to improve the efficiency of her work.

By the third day, Anne had finished the basic shape of the sculpture.

“Thank you, Mithril Lid Pod. You’re really a big help.”

Anne thanked him as she shook blue powder out of one of the vials.

Mithril laughed. “This is how helpful I can be if I really give it my all!” He sounded rather proud of himself. “But little stuff like this doesn’t amount to paying back my debt to you, Anne. I still aspire to return the favor in some grand way, you know!”

“Oh, you can forget about that stuff, all right?”

“I cannot. It’s a matter of my pride as a fairy.”

“I didn’t realize it was such a big deal...”

“It sure is! By the way, just where did that Challe Fenn Challe get off to?”

“Who knows?”

Unlike Mithril, Challe had abruptly left the row house as soon as Anne began working. He had wandered outside every day for the past three days and had not come back until Anne was finished for the day.

Anne figured he had been going for walks or the like. She wasn’t particularly concerned.

She closed the lid of a vial of colored powder and set it down on the table. As she kneaded color into the silver sugar, Mithril grumbled and complained.

“What’s with that Challe Fenn Challe? Off having a good time by himself.”

“I mean, you’re here helping me. There’s nothing for Challe to do, is there?”

“Well, maybe you’re right. With me here, he’s got no role to play, I guess.”

Mithril seemed to be in a good mood as he tidied up the vials.

“I guess even a coldhearted, callous guy like him is sentimental about things. It’s probably good for him to bask in it.”

“Sentimental? Challe?”

“I think it was three days ago? When we first got to this castle, yeah. You had us wait with the wagon, right? While we were waiting, Challe Fenn Challe said something. He said it brought back memories. When I asked him what he meant, he told me he used to live in a castle like this one a long time ago.”

Anne stopped kneading the silver sugar for a moment.

Nostalgia? For the castle? Or for Liz, who lived in the castle?

Perhaps Challe’s beautiful black eyes were at that very moment gazing and reminiscing about the face of a girl long gone. Maybe that was why he had been going out for walks alone. Thinking about it made Anne feel as if she were suffocating.

“He didn’t seem to have felt the same way about Hugh’s castle, since it was too new. This place is old, right? It sounded like the castle that he lived in was old as well. I wonder if he was employed by nobles at some point? He didn’t tell me all that much, but... Anne? What’s the matter?”

“Ah, no, it’s nothing.”

When she realized she had been staring into space, Anne smiled and looked at Mithril.

The moment she did, he burst out laughing.

“Anne! The tip of your nose is bright blue! You’ve got powder on it!”

“Huh?!”

She touched the end of her nose in a panic.

“It’s even bluer now!”

Anne started to feel a little embarrassed with Mithril laughing at her.

“I’ll go wash it off at the well.”

She left the row house and ran to the well. She scooped up some water in a basin and peered at its surface. Sure enough, the tip of her nose was blue. More

importantly, she was disappointed by her own plain appearance.

“We were always together. After fifteen years, Liz’s hair turned golden blond, her freckles faded, and she became a beautiful young woman.”

Challe had spoken those words to Anne previously.

After fifteen years, he said. That means around of the age of twenty, Liz had golden hair and was gorgeous, right? I’m fifteen, so will I become pretty after five more years?

Anne did not think so. If things stayed as they were, she was liable to become a skinny, scrawny, childlike twenty-year-old with bad posture, one who looked like a scarecrow.

Challe is so beautiful. Of course he would like attractive women. Women like Liz.

Following that line of thought brought Anne to a realization. She recognized the source of the emotions she felt every time she heard about Liz.

Am I jealous? Of Liz?

She felt like a fool for being envious of a girl she’d never even met, a girl who was no longer even alive. Anne was disgusted with herself.

She drew up fresh water in the basin and desperately scrubbed her face, washing it over and over again with water so cold it felt as if it were cutting into her skin.

I’ve got to stop getting distracted. I’m supposed to be making sugar candy right now!

“Your nose will fall off if you scrub that hard.”

A voice from above her head surprised Anne, and she lifted her wet face.

“Challe.”

Drops of water trickled down her chin. Challe frowned.

“Your dress is getting wet.”

When he said that, Anne realized that she had forgotten something.

“Ah... I forgot a towel...”

Her shoulders drooped at her own stupidity.

Challe suddenly extended a hand and gently stroked Anne’s face from her chin up to her cheek with his fingertip. His finger was cold. She knew that he was wiping away the water droplets for her, but in spite of herself, she was startled and pulled away.

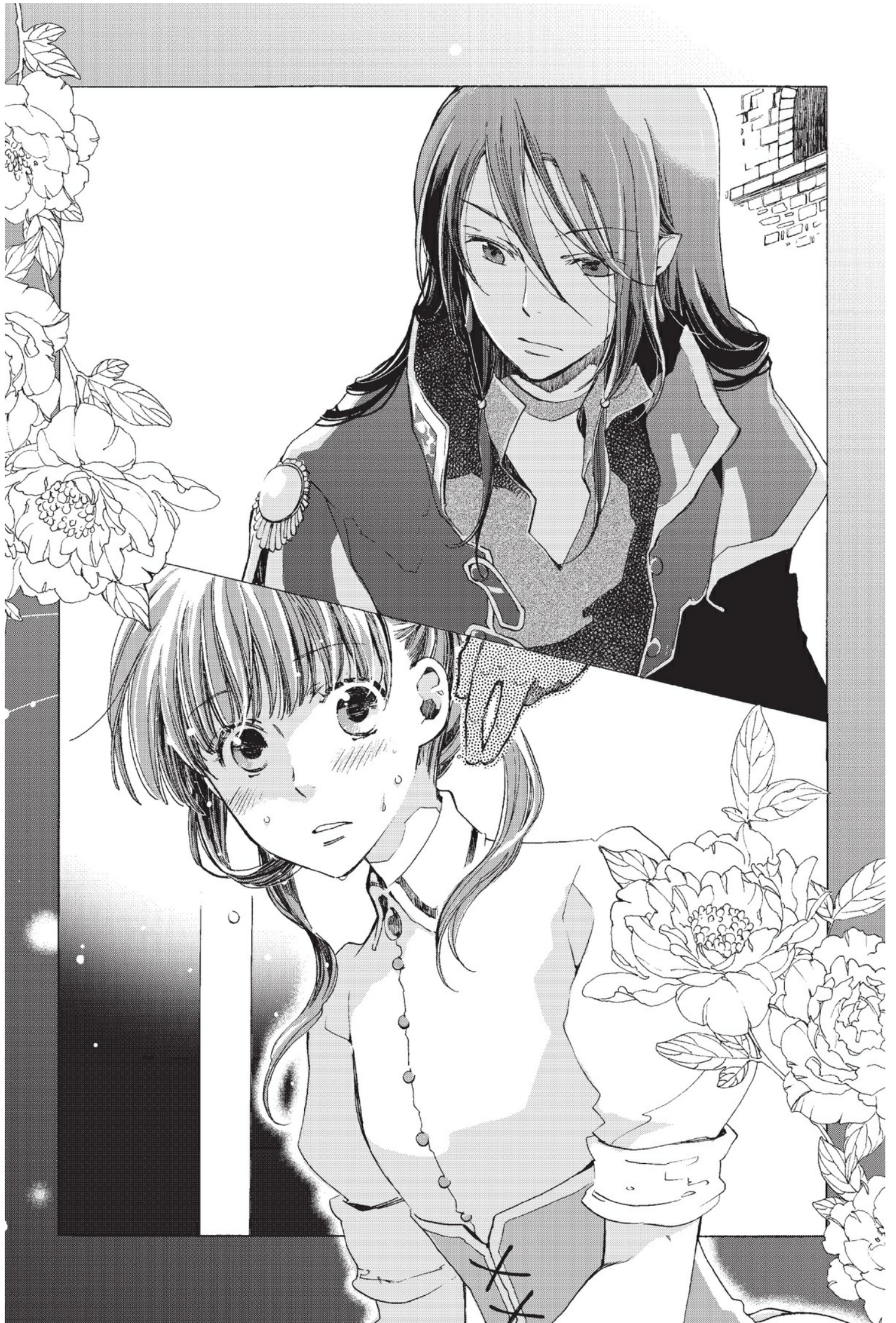
The place where he had touched her suddenly grew hot. She suspected her whole face was turning red.

“What’s the matter?”

Challe tilted his head, looking puzzled. From the way he was acting, she could tell that he wasn’t making fun of her like he always did. He had actually been innocently wiping away the water for her.

She had to say something. But her mind was blank.

“Scarecrow?”



Challe's expression was one of sincere curiosity. His black eyes were staring straight at Anne.

She didn't want him to figure out why she was overreacting.

"I-it's nothing!"

It was all she could do to say that much. Anne turned on her heel and ran full tilt back toward the row house.

If his fingers are that cold, why are his breath and his wing so warm?

Her cheeks grew even hotter as she recalled his breath and the warmth of his wing, which she had touched once.

Anne found it somehow difficult to meet Challe's gaze over dinner that evening.

But she didn't feel any awkwardness the following morning. She was grateful that she had slept well. For better or worse, her feelings had somewhat settled down, at least for the time being.

She finished her breakfast and was about to start working when there was a knock at her door.

Anne couldn't think of anyone who would go out of their way to come visit her, so she opened it with confusion.

"Yes?"

Standing there was Jonas. He was grinning.

Anne hardened her visage.

"What are you doing here? If you're looking for some sugar candy to steal, I haven't finished mine yet."

Jonas's expression soured a little at her scathing remark.

"How terrible. There won't be any use for your little candy sculpture. I finished mine already, you see. All five of us completed ours yesterday."

"Huh...?"

Anne was surprised to hear that he had completed his candy the day before.

But she didn't want Jonas to look down on her, so she put on a brave front and replied, "Is that so? Well, has the duke taken a look at them?"

"He observed them last night. The other four are leaving this morning."

At that point, Jonas couldn't contain himself anymore, and a smirk spread across his face.

Over Jonas's shoulder, Anne noticed the other four candy crafters leaving with their luggage in hand, looking dejected. They were staring reproachfully at Jonas's back.

"The duke saw my work and said, 'It has promise. Improve your precision.' Then he permitted me to continue staying in the castle. Unfortunately for you, it seems the Duke of Philax will be awarding the thousand cress to me."

"We don't know that yet."

"Didn't you hear? I'm the first person to show the duke their work and be allowed to stay at the castle. I'm the only one! Dale told me."

"Well, I'll be the next!"

"I'm moving to a room in the castle tower now. That's a privilege for the duke's chosen candy crafter. Give it your all, Anne," Jonas said triumphantly. He waved his hand flippantly and went back down the stairs outside her front door.

Anne slammed the door shut. She stomped back over to the table.

"What did he come here for, that jerk?! What was that? A ploy to kill my motivation?!"

Challe was sitting at the table, holding a dried berry in the palm of his hand. The berry in his hand got smaller and smaller, then finally disappeared. That was how fairies ate. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Eating the berries one by one, Challe said, "I doubt that simpleton put that much thought into it."

"Then what was he doing?!"

"Probably just bragging. It's not like he could boast to his departing pals, after all."

"If that's really what he was doing, it really got on my nerves. He should go

somewhere else if he wants to brag, seriously.”

Anne cleared off the top of the table in a huff. Then she moved her partially finished candy sculpture, which had been sitting in a corner of the room, onto the table. She removed the cloth covering the candy.

“But I think your candy sculpture is turning out really well, too, Anne,” Mithril said with admiration as he looked up at the sugar candy sitting on the tabletop.

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s beautiful. Right, Challe Fenn Challe?”

He looked up at the candy, too. After gazing at it for a minute, he nodded and gave his opinion.

“It looks good.”

Anne felt simply delighted by the praise. She composed herself and began to work.

She’d come to love making candy sculptures of fairies since becoming acquainted with Challe and Mithril. She enjoyed her work and felt confident in the result that was steadily taking shape.



“I think it’s done.”

Anne heaved a sigh. Too exhausted to remain standing, she then flopped down in a chair.

It was the evening of the third day since Jonas had moved into the room in the castle tower.

There were two lamps burning on the table. Anne had been working deep into the night.

Mithril had long since fallen asleep. Challe was sitting with his back to Anne. He had been keeping the fire burning and was trying to stay out of her way.

For the past several days, he had gone out on walks in the afternoon and avoided interrupting her work. Sometimes, when Challe was by her side, Anne's mind seemed to be thrown into disarray.

Challe had deduced that his harmless words and actions seemed to be the cause, but he had no idea which had set her off. He'd concluded it would be best for him to stay away so that he did not disturb her concentration.

"What do you think, Challe? Will you come take a look?"

She called out to him, and he got up and went behind her chair.

Like cascading water, the fairy's hair flowed from the top of her head down to her waist, gradually transitioning from dark to pale blue. Her wings fluttered gently, like silk caught in a breeze. Her arms, extended in front of her, looked very delicate. Her features were represented with only the slightest modeling. Even so, they gave the impression that she must be smiling. The whole piece had a gentle aura.

"It's well-made," he answered, after looking it over carefully. But there was no response from Anne. "Hello...?"

It suddenly occurred to him that Anne might be having another strange reaction, and he peered over at her face.

"...What the...?"

Anne was breathing heavily, asleep in her chair.

She had been working nonstop for the past three days. She must have been exhausted.

Challe moved the completed candy sculpture and placed it on the floor in the corner of the room. He protected it by placing a soft cloth on top, just as Anne always did.

She stayed fast asleep during the whole process. He wondered whether he should wake her and send her to bed on the second floor.

He stood in front of her, looking down. Her peaceful, sleeping face was completely defenseless. It made him hesitate a bit. He recalled how she had looked when they first met, nervously trying to sleep, clutching his wing to her

chest.

Now she had given Challe back his wing and seemed to trust him as a friend.

But still, she's too vulnerable.

He wondered if she thought of him as some sort of guardian.

Perhaps she had forgotten that Challe had been alive for over a hundred years and that he was a hardened warrior. He had done all sorts of things over the course of his life, things Anne couldn't even imagine. If she knew even a fraction of what he had done, she would probably be terrified of him and turn her back on him.

He picked up the sleeping girl. She was thin and light.

Challe went up the stairs and laid her down in the nearest bed. He pulled the blanket up over her.

The sea breeze was whistling over the castle walls as always. He could feel a draft around his feet.

He looked down at Anne's face. She showed no signs of waking.

"Why are you so concerned with Anne?"

Like the sound of the wind, Hugh's question suddenly resounded in his ears.

Anne could have secured a safe and comfortable life for herself by taking Hugh up on his offer. That was perfectly clear. But for some reason, that didn't interest her.

I don't want to entrust her to Hugh.

Challe found his own thoughts bewildering,

Entrust? She's not my property.

Even though she didn't belong to him, he didn't want to hand her over to someone else. He wasn't sure where this selfish feeling was coming from.



The moment Duke Alburn beheld her candy sculpture, Anne thought she saw something waver just a little bit in his expressionless eyes.

Duke Alburn stared intently at Anne's sugar candy. But that glimmer of emotion died out slowly. In its place was something that sounded like disappointment as he muttered, "...Wrong."

Anne paled at the word.

That morning, Anne had told Dale she had finished her candy sculpture. She was then instructed to bring her candy up to the reception hall in the castle tower, whether or not she was finished with breakfast.

Unlike last time, she was hardly made to wait after entering the reception hall.

Duke Alburn arrived in a hurry, tore off the cloth covering the sculpture with his own hands, and examined her work.

Then he muttered that word. "Wrong," he said.

Duke Alburn sat in his chair and was silent for a minute.

He doesn't like it...even though Challe and Mithril both told me it was well-made...

She couldn't help but feel depressed.

"But the overall feel of it is just right," Duke Alburn added.

"Huh?"

Reflexively, Anne raised her head. But Duke Alburn wasn't looking at her. He was still staring at the candy.

"It has a better presence to it than the one Anders made. Improve your precision. Work until I'm satisfied. You will move to a room in the castle tower."

After saying that much, Duke Alburn said to Dale, who was waiting off to the side, "We have two candy crafters. I don't suppose we need any more than that."

After giving this simple order, Duke Alburn left.

Anne was flabbergasted, but Dale tapped her on the shoulder with a smile.

“All right, you,” he said. “Gather your things from the row house, and go get your friends. I’ll prepare your room in the castle tower.”

“Um...does this mean that the duke likes my candy sculpture?”

“I think we can say he’s fairly pleased with it. He seemed just as fond of it as Anders’s candy, at least. It seems he will be leaving the candy sculpting up to you and him, since he said we don’t need any more crafters.”

“Ah...thank you so much.”

For the time being, Anne felt relieved to know she had been approved.

But she couldn’t feel completely happy, probably because Dale had said the duke liked her work only “fairly well.”

She wondered what that meant, exactly. How was she supposed to improve her precision?

Anne had too many doubts to be elated.

For now, she collected her things from the row house and moved to the new location.

Anne was assigned a room in one of the four castle spires. She was on the top floor of the southwest tower, and Jonas was on the level below.

As she ascended the stairs, she passed his room. The door was closed, and she couldn’t see inside.

The layout of the castle was too complicated for Anne. She would be hard-pressed to roam about it on her own. To go from the reception hall to her new room in the southwest tower, she had to walk up and down several flights of stairs. She turned down countless narrow corridors. Just walking to her room was enough to disorient her.

Not long after Anne had arrived, several barrels of silver sugar were brought up to her. Evidently, the duke didn’t care how much candy she made.

On the other hand, Dale had instructed her to set about her work immediately.

Whenever she thought she had finished a sculpture, she was supposed to pull

the cord hanging in her room. This would ring a bell in the servants' quarters, and they would inform Duke Alburn that a piece was complete. That was the arrangement.

Unlike at Hugh's castle, Anne was being treated as an ordinary worker, not a guest. Her room was plain, and its stone walls were bare. There was only one bed. The space was also smaller and less convenient than the row house

On the other hand, there was no need for them to fix their own meals.

Morning and evening, twice a day, food was brought up to them from the castle's kitchen. Hot water for tea would also be prepared if requested.

Anne set her candy sculpture on the workbench and started looking it over as soon as she settled in.

"So he said the overall feel was good, right? And that I need to work on my precision. I wonder if I could polish up the details without ruining the whole composition? But it'll get too busy if I add in too many elements there..."

Challe had left the room, as he always did.

Mithril was sitting by the window, waiting patiently until he could assist Anne.

"Anne?!"

A horrified voice came from behind her back.

When she turned around, she saw Jonas sticking his face through the door.

"I thought I heard noise from upstairs. Why are you here?"

"They told me to move in here."

"You too...?"

Jonas was overcome with surprise. Speaking for him was another voice from somewhere around his feet.

"As if someone like you is a worthy rival for Master Jonas! Right, Master Jonas?"

It was Cathy. She was glaring at Anne. Jonas smiled stiffly, apparently encouraged by her support.

“W-well then. I won’t lose to you.”

“I’m not inclined to lose, either,” Anne answered resolutely.

Chapter 4

A FORCED GOOD-BYE

A bell rang downstairs.

It happened the same day that Anne had moved into her room in the castle tower. Jonas rang his bell that evening. He must have gotten impatient after her arrival. There were sounds of someone entering Jonas's room immediately and then leaving again.

Anne wasn't sure what she would do if Jonas finished his sculpture first and it was accepted by the Duke of Philax. The thought made her anxious. Still, morning arrived with no further movement from below.

Neither did an order for Anne to stop working on her sugar candy and leave.

So she continued laboring on her sculpture through the day. The sun rose high in the sky as she worked with Mithril's help.

She was surprised to hear the bell downstairs ring again.

"That was Jonas, wasn't it?" she said, looking up from her work. "He finished one piece last night, and now another one? Maybe he fixed some spots that were pointed out to him, or something like that? I wonder if he beat me to it?"

Anne had been thinking about ringing her own bell very soon. Naturally, she was nervous.

Mithril saw Anne looking anxious and stood up.

"Okay! The great Mithril will lend a hand!"

"What are you going to do?"

“I’ll go take a peek.”

Mithril discreetly tied his personal pocket handkerchief around his head and sneaked out of the room.

Anne wondered how Jonas’s sculpture had turned out. Eager to know, she waited impatiently for Mithril to return when Challe came back from his walk. Mithril was dangling from his right hand, struggling violently.

“Let me go! Let go, Challe Fenn Challe!”

Anne’s eyes went wide. “Challe, what are you doing with Mithril?”

He let go of Mithril’s shirt collar. The tiny fairy flopped to the floor and shrieked.

“I was on my way back from my walk and happened to run across him just as he was about to go into Jonas’s room,” Challe explained. “He looked like he was planning to do something strange, so I grabbed him.”

“I wasn’t going to do anything weird at all! I was just gonna play a little prank. I thought I would ring the bell to signal he was done, that’s all!”

Mithril was sitting on the floor with his arms crossed, and he turned away from Challe in a huff.

“You said you were only going to take a peek! Were you really planning on pranking him?!” Anne shouted in surprise.

Jonas was a jerk, but Anne didn’t approve of getting that kind of comeuppance.

Mithril stood up, looking a little panicked. “No, wait, Anne! Don’t misunderstand me! I really did go just to get a look. But Jonas looked super bummed out, so I got excited. I thought I would kick him while he was down.”

“You got excited to kick him while he was down...? That’s even worse, isn’t it...?” Anne mumbled.

Challe said, “She’s right. If you’re going to do something, forget about little pranks and cut right to serious measures.”

“What do you mean by that?! Pranks are bad enough, but surely, any decent

person could recognize doing something serious is worse!”

When she said that, Mithril and Challe glanced at each other. And then—
“We’re not people.”

They said it in unison.

Anne put her head in her hand, disappointed.

“Ah, right... Let’s just...drop it.”

She gave up on scolding the two fairies.

“But if Jonas was down in the dumps, maybe that means his sugar candy didn’t please the duke.”

When Anne said that, Mithril folded his arms again and nodded enthusiastically. “I think that’s absolutely what it means. Furthermore, he had bruises on his face. He must have had a little lover’s quarrel with Cathy. A stupendous state of affairs!”

Challe looked suspicious of what Mithril was saying.

Anne cocked her head. “Would Cathy do something like that?”

She couldn’t imagine Cathy raising a hand against Jonas when she was his biggest supporter. She decided Jonas had probably just fallen on the stairs or in his room.

“So. Is your candy sculpture finished?” Challe asked.

Anne looked at her own work, which was standing behind her.

“Mm. I think it’s ready.”

“Should I give the signal?” Mithril grabbed the cord happily.

In truth, Anne felt like she hadn’t quite grasped what the duke meant by “improving her precision.” She had taken it to mean she should include more detailed sugar work, so she had increased the draping of the fairy’s dress and added an openwork pattern to the hem.

She worried that complicating the piece any further would destroy the overall composition. So she nodded with determination.

“Go ahead.”

When Mithril pulled the cord, the sound of the bell echoed through Anne’s room and the corridor outside and off into the distance somewhere. Before long, Anne heard stiff shoes coming up the stairs.

Without a knock, the door to her room opened.

“The duke...?”

There stood the Duke of Philax, Duke Alburn himself. He was accompanied by a page running behind him, but Anne had never imagined he would suddenly come to such a dreary room. It seemed preposterous.

In a panic, she knelt down on the floor and lowered her head. But Duke Alburn didn’t even look at Anne or anything else in the room. He went straight to the workbench and examined the candy sculpture.

Anne kept her head bowed and strained her eyes trying to see the duke’s reaction.

She could see the duke’s hands. He was clenching his fists, as if to contain a great anger.

“It hasn’t changed,” Duke Alburn grumbled.

“Ah...”

Anne lifted her head, unsure of the meaning of his words.

Duke Alburn looked at Anne. There was a hint of rage in his eyes.

“Didn’t you listen to what I said? I ordered you to sculpt the fairy painted in the portraits. And I also ordered you, yesterday, to improve your accuracy. This is the same as yesterday. Nothing has changed. Neither you nor the candy crafter downstairs understand a thing.”

That was all he said, then he immediately turned on his heel and left. Anne was stunned.

“What does that mean?”



What is he dissatisfied with?

Challe Fenn Challe was leaning back against the wall, staring at the sugar candy Anne had made.

Anne had been worrying nonstop about what was wrong with her sculpture. She had been sitting in front of it since midday, staring at it without moving. Then she'd rushed through dinner and then sat down before the candy again. She'd only realized it was dark when Mithril lit the lamp. She had thanked him for doing so but then resumed scrutinizing her candy sculpture.

Challe could understand Anne's confusion.

As far as he could tell, the first piece that Anne had made showed near-perfect workmanship. She couldn't add more detail than she had put into it already. Its form was perfect. The balance would be destroyed if she added or subtracted anything.

He couldn't tell why Duke Alburn was so displeased.

Mithril was also sitting by the window with a serious look on his face, waiting patiently for Anne to collect her thoughts. He didn't seem to be winning the fight against sleep, though, and was dozing off.

"Maybe I should try sculpting it from a different angle..."

It was past midnight when Anne muttered these few words. Suddenly, she stood up.

"If I tinker with this sculpture any more, the whole thing will fall apart and be worthless, even if I do improve my precision. I'll make another one...something more realistic...", she muttered.

Anne snatched the lamp off the table and was about to head out the door.

"Trying to get lost?"

When Challe called out to her, Anne seemed to snap out of it with a start and turned back toward him.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m going to take another look at the portrait of that fairy. If I remember correctly, it should be in the reception hall. I’ll look at it again and then alter the orientation of my sculpture to be more realistic.”

“So you think you can make it there without getting lost?”

When he asked, Anne made an expression of surprise, then hung her head.

“That’s right... I forgot...”

Then she looked at Challe apologetically.

“I know it’s the middle of the night, but would you come with me? Would that be okay?”

“Let’s go.”

Challe moved away from the wall and took the lamp from Anne’s hands. He led the way to the reception hall.

The hall was, of course, pitch-black. In the darkness, Challe held the light of the lantern up to the portrait.

It was cold, and Anne was hugging her shoulders. She could even see her own breath.

As he gazed at the portrait of the fairy wearing a gentle smile, Challe had a sudden thought. “Perhaps the Duke of Philax isn’t asking for a splendid work of sugar art?” he wondered aloud.

Anne looked up at Challe in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“If all he wanted was a magnificent piece of candy, your sculpture should have satisfied him perfectly well.”

“But the duke isn’t satisfied. The piece I made wasn’t what he wanted.”

When Anne turned her gaze back to the portrait, she stared at it intently, as if challenging it to a fight. Her face somehow looked more mature than usual.



The following morning, Anne started working again. Over the next five days, she made a new sugar candy sculpture.

It was just as large as the last one, but she completely changed the presentation.

She went down to stand in front of the portrait many times and drilled every detail of the fairy's appearance into her mind. She made a work that was realistic in presentation, like a perfect three-dimensional copy of the portrait.

Anne thought this piece lacked the aesthetic appeal of her previous creation. Instead, it featured a vivid use of color and an emphasis on sharp lines, fitting stylistic choices for a realistic portrayal. Without those things, her sugar candy sculpture would have lacked focus and come across as incomplete.

After five days, Anne thought she was finished. But she decided to go look at the portrait to check one more time.

She'd already made dozens of trips to and from the reception hall, to the point that she knew how to get there without needing Challe's guidance.

"I'm going to take a look at the picture, okay?" Anne said to Mithril, who was tidying up the table, before she left the room.

Challe had, as always, gone out for his walk.

It was twilight. Small windows ran along the staircase that spiraled around the interior of the tower. They let in the sea breeze, the light of the setting sun, and the smell of sea salt.

The chilly air brushed against her nape the moment Anne left her room, and she sneezed. She shivered, then began her descent.

When she did, the door to Jonas's room opened, as if this had been perfectly timed to coincide with the moment Anne was passing by.

Jonas peeked out. His face was haggard.

For the past five days, Anne had not heard the bell ring from downstairs. So

she had figured that Jonas must also be remaking his sculpture.

“Anne.”

He called out to her, so she came to a halt. This was unexpected.

“What?”

“What are you doing?”

“What do you mean, what? I’m going to look at that portrait of the fairy.”

When she answered, Jonas made an expression of disbelief.

“Then that means you’re making a sculpture?”

“Of course I am. Aren’t you, Jonas?”

“I can’t make anything. I have absolutely no idea what his critiques mean. I’m ready to quit...”

Anne was surprised to hear his feeble whining.

“What are you talking about? Though it would help me out if you gave up.”

“Now’s the only time you’ll be able to say that!”

Jonas suddenly shouted in anger and shut the door. Before it closed, Anne caught sight of a blue bruise on his left cheek.

“Jonas?”

Anne was concerned about Jonas’s behavior. He seemed cornered. He had gone out of his way to stop Anne as she passed by and confided in her, despite the fact he considered her his enemy. She could only imagine that something serious had happened.

Perhaps he was asking for her help. She briefly considered taking the time to hear what he had to say and talk to him about whatever had happened.

But when she remembered the poor treatment she had received from Jonas in Lewiston, it seemed like she was being a hopeless, good-natured fool. She walked right on toward the reception hall.

Anne checked the portrait once more and went back to her room. Then she rang the bell to signal that she was finished.

As expected, Duke Alburn appeared.

After staring at the candy sculpture for a short while, scrutinizing it, the duke glared at Anne with blazing eyes. She could almost see the rage rising from his whole body like a cold mist.

“What is this that you have made?”

“It’s the fairy in the portrait.”

“Wrong. This is utterly incorrect.”

Anne was shocked at his words. She had never expected to receive such harsh criticism.

She had certainly made her sculpture more realistic than the last one. There was no way it was inexact.

That can’t be right. I made it exactly like the painting. What is he dissatisfied about?

She was confused. In spite of her better judgment, she asked, “Well then, what’s wrong about it? Please tell me.”

“Everything,” the duke answered.

“What do you mean by that? I checked the portrait countless times and copied it onto the sculpture exactly. The workmanship is delicate, and I added more detail, while arranging the overall balance so it would work as a piece of candy.”

“I mean what I said! The whole thing is wrong, no more, no less! This only looks like her; it’s just an imitation! I can’t stand the sight of it!” Duke Alburn shouted.

Then he suddenly knocked the candy sculpture off the bench.

For an instant, Anne stopped breathing as she watched her candy smash on the floor.

Anne couldn’t move. Between the shock of seeing the fruits of five days’ labor broken into pieces and the terror Duke Alburn had instilled in her after exploding in anger, she stood frozen to the spot.

“Make her. Make her real.”

Duke Alburn spat out those words and said nothing else as he left the room.

Anne sank to the floor in exhaustion. The stone floor should have been cold, but she didn't feel it.

Mithril rushed over to Anne in a panic. He smacked her cheeks while she sat there in a daze.

“Anne, Anne, are you all right?! Get it together, Anne!”

“...My sugar candy...”

Gradually, tears welled up in her eyes.

“What happened here?”

There was a voice from the doorway. Anne slowly turned her head and saw Challe standing there. He had come back from his walk. He was making a stern face as he looked at Anne, slumped on the floor, and the smashed candy sculpture.

“Was this the Duke of Philax's doing?” Challe asked Mithril.

When Mithril nodded, Challe looked like he understood the situation.

He walked calmly over to Anne and got down on one knee in front of her.

“You couldn't raise a hand to stop him?”

His voice was monotonous, but even so, his concern for her came through perfectly well.

“...No.”

“The Duke of Philax wasn't satisfied with your work?”

When Anne shook her head, Challe sighed lightly. Then he began talking in a gentle voice.

“What the Duke of Philax is asking for is something unachievable, for you or anyone else. Even if you make a respectable candy sculpture, I doubt he will accept it. It would be best to withdraw.”



“...Huh?”

“You don’t need a thousand cress or to earn yourself a reputation. You should back out and leave this place.”

“Are you talking about quitting this job halfway through?”

“That’s right.”

“But, I...I took it on. I said I was up to it.”

“There are some things you just can’t do.”

At that point, Mithril voiced his agreement.

“He’s right, Anne. I also feel like it would be best for you to quit. It’s too bad about the thousand cress, though.”

Leave the job?

If I can’t do it, that would mean resigning from a job that I accepted. The thing that’s keeping me from completing my work is that I don’t really understand what the duke is asking for. This is his fault, and yet...

No way.

Deep in her heart, she felt the pull of something unreasonable, some sense of obstinate determination.

I don’t want to admit that it’s impossible.

“It’s my fault I can’t do it, my fault that I can’t understand what the duke is asking for. I mean, it goes without saying that I should make what the client requests. I just can’t tell what that is because I’m not clever enough.”

Still in shock, she answered in a tearful voice.

“What he wants is something unimaginable,” Challe said. “It’s probably something that can’t even be made of candy.”

Could he really be demanding something that’s impossible to make?

Anne thought back on everything Duke Alburn had said and done. While she was thinking, her feelings of agitation settled down. Then Anne remembered the expression that had flashed across Duke Alburn’s face, just for a moment.

“It can’t be something impossible to make.”

She looked up suddenly.

“It’s got to be something that can be made of sugar candy. When the duke looked at my candy sculpture, just for a second, he seemed happy. But after examining it carefully, he said it was wrong. I don’t think he would have made that face if he was looking for something impossible to represent in candy form. That’s why.”

Mithril looked stunned to hear those words. “So you’re saying that you’re going to keep the job, Anne?”

“Please stop. I know you’re both worried about me...but...”

“You’re the candy crafter here. You should be the one to decide,” Challe said bluntly, and he stood up.

“I’m sorry, Challe, Mithril Lid Pod. You’re stuck keeping me company, but...”

“Only because there’s no one more interesting around to pass the time with. I don’t mind.” Even as he grumbled, Challe took Anne’s hand and helped her to her feet.

Mithril nodded in agreement, despite looking somewhat fed up. “We know perfectly well that you’re a dummy, Anne, so we’re not surprised at all.”

Anne didn’t want to abandon the request.

She was too stubborn. She hated the idea of raising the white flag and running away.

Outside of making sugar candy, there was nothing Anne wanted to do and nothing she thought worth doing. A part of her felt like she might lose her grasp on that special calling if she abandoned her singular focus for even a moment.

But even if she stubbornly decided to continue working, she wondered what kind of sugar candy she ought to make. Determination didn’t change the fact that she was out of ideas.

For the time being, she decided she would take it easy and rest for the remainder of that evening.

She didn't touch the silver sugar. Instead, she focused on regaining her composure and preparing herself to grab onto some new idea.

Anne finished her dinner and sat at the table drinking hot tea. She wanted to warm her body up before bed.

She poured some for Challe, too. He was leaning an arm against the table, holding his palm above the steaming cup and enjoying his tea. He seemed to be enjoying the aroma of the aged tea that wafted through the room. From time to time, he narrowed his eyes; whenever he did, his wing shone a gentle pale-green.

The exhaustion from the past few days' work seemed to have caught up with Mithril. After dinner, he had immediately slipped into bed. Anne looked at him breathing deeply in his sleep and felt she had done something wrong. She had been so absorbed in her work that she hadn't noticed how tired he was.

Since moving into the tower room, Mithril and Anne had been using the bed. Challe had been spreading a leather sheet out on the floor and sleeping under a single blanket. Anne had been worrying about that, too.

"Challe. You sleep in the bed tonight. I'll sleep on the floor."

"That I can do, but I'm kicking Mithril Lid Pod out. His teeth grinding is annoying."

"That's so mean! Don't do it."

"Well, then, I'll sleep on the floor. That's fine with me."

Anne deflated. In the end, Challe had no inclination to use the bed. Yet she found it exhausting when he jerked her chain like that, because she reacted sincerely every time.

"Just when did you become such a curmudgeon, Challe?"

"I'd be shocked if you could find someone who's lived over a hundred years and isn't a little bit of a misanthrope." Then he looked across the table at Anne and smiled mischievously. "I bet you wouldn't change deep down, even if you lived for a century."

"What is that supposed to mean? Are you saying I'm not charming at all...?"

But a hundred years ago, huh? I wonder if you weren't so cynical back then, Challe..."

"Back then, sure."

"You weren't?!"

She couldn't imagine it. But just as Anne had once been a baby, Challe must have grown and changed as well. She wondered what kind of look Challe had had on his face when he was born. Maybe he had been smiling innocently like a young boy. Anne wished she could have seen it. Liz would have.

Liz.

The feeling that resembled jealousy reared its ugly head again. Hoping to swallow the feeling, Anne gulped down her cold tea. The tea slid down her throat, but the awful feeling still remained.

As she looked at Challe's calm profile, the urge to ask him about Liz welled up in her chest.

"How about getting some sleep?"

Anne had suddenly gone quiet, which Challe had taken to mean that she was exhausted.

But she wasn't tired at all. Rather, her emotions had in some respects cooled down, and her head was clear.

She wrapped her hands around her empty teacup and stared down at it. And then— "Liz..."

Finally, the name came out of her mouth.

Anne knew she was making a mistake.

But she didn't stop the words that followed.

"What kind of girl was she? Was she beautiful?"

"Beautiful?"

Challe didn't seem to wonder why Anne would ask him something like that. He probably thought she was making regular small talk.

He fixed his gaze on an empty spot in space, as if he were looking at Liz standing there.

“I thought she was.”

“What color were her eyes? Was her hair long? Was she very graceful?”

“She had blue eyes. Her hair was quite long. She never cut it, from age five on. Graceful...? Not exactly, but she was mature. She was quiet and thoughtful.”

Beautiful, mature, and quiet? A thoughtful young lady.

I am not pretty. I'm childlike and noisy. I don't think things through a lot of the time.

Anne's mind filled with self-deprecating thoughts.

And I'm jealous...

She couldn't help but be desperately jealous. Challe probably saw Liz everywhere he looked with his black eyes. As Anne stared at his lovely profile, that thought pierced her heart.

Suddenly, Challe looked in her direction. Then his eyes widened slightly.

“What's the matter?”

Anne didn't know what had startled him.

Then she felt something wet.

She noticed the drop of water that had fallen near her hands. She touched her own cheek. She was crying.

“Ah...what's this? I...”

She wanted to stop it, but there was no way to hold back the tears that were already flowing.

Challe was looking at her with confusion, a rarity for him.

For the past few days, she had done nothing but worry about her sugar candy. Then that candy had been smashed by Duke Alburn earlier in the evening.

That must have been why she was crying. She had decided to continue with the job, but the exhaustion was throwing her emotions into an unstable state.

Normally, she wouldn't cry over something like this. She wouldn't have been foolish enough to ask about Liz in the first place. Her tears had finally shown her the extent of her own stupidity.

She didn't want Challe to see her like that, so she turned her back to him. She couldn't move from her spot.

She didn't know what she would do if he asked her why she was crying. That was all she could think about.

"Did I say something to hurt your feelings?"

"No..."

She shook her head, but she couldn't lift her face. She wept even more when he spoke to her.

After a little while, she sensed Challe standing up. He was probably trying to be considerate. He left the room without hesitation.

Anne chided herself for being foolish.

At last her tears stopped, and she wiped her face roughly with the sleeve of her dress.

She was certain she had made Challe feel uncomfortable. It wasn't his fault she'd started crying. She had to tell him that. It would be best to get him to come back to the room quickly and get some rest.

Anne also needed to sleep and recover her energy. Then she would set about her work again the next day.

Surely, she would be able to forget these unpleasant feelings once she did that.

Anne left her room with a lamp in hand and headed for the stairs.

"Challe? Challe, are you out here?"

She illuminated the staircase up and down and called his name, but there was no answer.

When Challe went out strolling alone, he often went to the roof of the tower. So she went to check the rooftop. But all she found was a strong wind howling

through the darkness. Challe wasn't there. She went to check the reception hall, too, just in case, but he wasn't there, either.

She knew she would get lost if she went anywhere else. Helplessly, she returned to her room.

When Anne reached her room, she saw that the door was slightly ajar. She was sure that she had shut it tightly when she'd left. Feeling hopeful, she quickly opened the door.

"Challe?!"

Standing there was someone different.

"Jonas?"

"Hey, Anne."

Jonas looked uncharacteristically nervous.

"Why are you in my room?"

"There was just something I had to take care of. Say, do you know what this is?"

As he said that, Jonas held up his right hand and showed her something he was holding. It was a fairy's wing, about the size of his palm.

"That wing—"

When she looked at the bed in surprise, she saw Mithril sitting there, hanging his head.

When Mithril noticed Anne's gaze, he lifted his face. He looked like he was about to cry.

"Anne, I'm so sorry. I was fast asleep, and...he stole my wing."

Mithril had one wing left on his back. Anne had returned the other wing, which had been plucked off by a fairy hunter. It could never be put onto his back again. So Mithril had been wearing his own wing wrapped around his neck like a scarf. But the one that had been wound around his neck was missing.

"Jonas. What possessed you to do that? Give him back his wing. If you have a problem, you can take it up with me directly, can't you?"

Her voice trembled with rage.

“I’m not planning to do anything to you. Though there is something I’d like to get you to do for me.”

Jonas did not speak or act like someone with the upper hand. His eyes made him look like he was at his wit’s end, like he’d been backed into a corner.

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I want you to go to Challe now and tell him, ‘I don’t want you with me anymore, so please leave the castle.’ Say, ‘Don’t show your face in front of me again.’”

“Why?! Why would I do such a thing?!”

“It’s not impossible, is it?”

Jonas twisted Mithril’s wing sharply with both hands.

Mithril shrieked and fell off the bed.

“Stop it!!”

Anne tried to throw herself upon Jonas, but he dodged nimbly and held the wing aloft.

“I’m taking Mithril with me and retiring to my room. I’m leaving Cathy behind. I’ll give the wing back once you do exactly as I say and drive Challe from this castle. But if you try to tell him about me, Cathy will be listening. She’ll let me know right away if she hears anything I won’t like. And then I will tear this wing to pieces.”

“Jonas, you...”

“Come along now, Mithril.”

Jonas gave Anne a sidelong glance. She glared at him, and he quickly left the room.

As Mithril walked past Anne, he apologized to her.

She had absolutely no idea why Jonas would do this. She was almost blind with rage. Taking Mithril as a hostage was beyond cowardly.

“Don’t forget I’m watching you, Anne.”

There was a voice from beside the window. Cathy was sitting there cross-legged, watching Anne with a faint smile on her face.

“If you say anything more, I’ll report it to Master Jonas immediately.”

That was all Cathy said before the color suddenly started to drain from her body, starting from her feet. She gradually grew transparent and disappeared. Turning invisible was her special power.

“Why are you doing this?”

Anne was wild with anger. But she knew that she had to do as Jonas said. That was the only thing she did understand.



Why did Anne start crying? I don’t really understand.

She asked me about Liz, and I just answered her questions. That’s what I thought, at least.

And yet Anne started crying.

Come to think of it, during those years I spent with Liz...after she turned fifteen but before she died...I often could not understand what she was thinking. She would cry or get angry out of nowhere, just like Anne. And she would always say the same thing when she did: “It’s because I’m in love with you.”

Challe had felt the same. He had loved the young lady from the bottom of his heart.

So he had thought carefully about the best path to bring her happiness. The conclusion he had reached was that it would be best for Liz if he was not around. Rather than allow her to be unhappy by his side, it would be better to entrust her to someone who could definitely bring her joy. That was the safer choice. He would have been satisfied with that.

But Liz had cried. After she'd repeated that she was in love with him, he had answered that he felt the same way.

"My love for you and your love for me are different," Liz had responded.

He hadn't understood what she had meant. And she was killed before he could figure it out.

For twenty years after Liz died, he had given himself over to hatred and rage and had taken his revenge.

When he saw that through, he had fallen into despondency.

His anger and animosity toward humans had smoldered away in the depths of his heart. Then he'd slowly ceased to care about anything. He had spent nearly eighty years as a hollow shell.

If he really thought about it, the only experience he'd had dealing with humans and their feelings was the fifteen years he had spent with Liz. He had an overwhelming lack of understanding. He was practically on the same level as fifteen-year-old Anne. Perhaps he even had less experience than she did.

He was well acquainted with the feelings of hatred, rage, and resignation. But he didn't know much outside of that. It was difficult for him to make inferences about Anne's feelings.

Challe stayed on the walkway along the ramparts until it was past midnight. A strong wind carrying the smell of seawater blew ceaselessly through the pitch-dark night. It was the perfect setting to cool his head.

The stars were high overhead, clear and brilliant in the midwinter sky. Challe could measure the time from the positions of the stars. When he thought it was late enough that Anne would be asleep, he made his way back to the room.

No matter what happened during the day, she woke up the next day like nothing had happened. Even if an issue had transpired earlier, Anne would go to sleep, and everything would be settled come morning.

Challe entered the room and was surprised to find that Anne was still awake. She had the lamp lit on the table and was sitting motionlessly in a chair. When she sensed that he had entered the room, she looked up with a start. Her

expression was stiff.

“Challe...please. I want you to...get out of here.”

“You want me to sleep in a different room?”

When he answered her with a question, Anne shook her head.

“No. I want you to leave this castle. And...don’t come back again. Don’t come back to me.”

The meaning of her words didn’t immediately sink in. But slowly it registered.

“You don’t want to be together, is that what you’re saying?”

Without looking up, Anne nodded deeply.

What is she suggesting, all of a sudden?

A feeling similar to anger swelled up inside him. But unlike anger, the feeling didn’t turn into rage; it just grew larger and weighed like an awful pressure on his chest. He started to grow irritated.

“And the reason?”

He felt his irritation would never settle down if he didn’t at least ask her that.

But Anne just shook her head.

“Tell me the reason,” he insisted.

The second time he asked, she gave him fragments of an answer.

“It’s not your fault, Challe...it’s mine. I’m sorry. So please don’t ask.”

That seemed to be the best she could muster. She kept her eyes downcast and didn’t move, except for the trembling of her shoulders.

It was just like earlier when Anne had started crying. He did not understand the cause at all. But he had no doubt that she had her own reasons.

All of a sudden, he felt something cold run through his chest like an icy draft.

Is there any reason for me to stick around if I’m not needed here?

The familiar feeling of lethargy that he’d known for eighty years came creeping back to him. He had completely forgotten about it over the past two

and a half months.

This must be how everything works. It all ends abruptly.

Challe figured it was pointless to ask Anne any more questions. He couldn't see a reason to keep on asking anyway.

When he had decided to go with Anne, he had felt certain that she needed him. He was with her because he was convinced of it. That was all.

Now that he had been told quite clearly that that wasn't the case, there was no need to continue questioning her.

Challe turned his back to Anne and started walking away. Old feelings of despondency came back to him. But among them was a new knot of irritation, as if some foreign object were lodged in his chest. It was his first time feeling that particular discomfort.

Challe left the castle.



Anne couldn't hold back her tears as she listened to Challe's retreating footsteps.

She kept her head down, and tears dripped onto her lap.

"What a good job you did."

Cathy reappeared. She jumped down from the windowsill, then up onto the table.

"Awww, are you crying?"

Anne rubbed her tears away on her sleeve and turned her face away from Cathy. The fairy huffed as if Anne had ruined her fun, then left to fetch Jonas.

She had rejected Challe. The anger and all the other feelings she had toward Jonas left her body, leaving her feeling drained and empty. She leaned limply against the back of her chair.

I wonder what Challe thought of me? I'm sure he thought I was a selfish jerk. But maybe he's relieved to be separated from me. Like he's finally really free.

She had never really understood why he'd stayed with her in the first place. Perhaps he had felt some sort of obligation toward her for returning his wing to him. But he must have been happy to leave now that she had rejected him. Anne was certain that Challe was leaving the castle feeling refreshed.

Her tears welled up again at the thought.

"So you really did it, huh, Anne?"

Jonas had entered the room; she held back her tears with some effort. She didn't want him to see her crying or upset.

She got to her feet and came closer to Jonas.

"Come on, give back Mithril Lid Pod's wing."

"Not yet. Tomorrow, you and I are going to meet with the Duke of Philax. And you will not contradict a single thing that I say. All you need to say is that everything is exactly as I claim."

"What are you planning on doing?"

"Just do what I say. I'm returning the little bastard to your room. He's so annoying; just holding on to his wing will be sufficient."

That was all Jonas said before leaving.

Anne wondered what Jonas was trying to do. She had no doubt that he was trying to set something up for his own advantage, just like two months earlier when he had stolen her sugar sculpture.

Unlike last time, though, she couldn't see the part of him that took joy in his scheming. He was the type of guy who couldn't hide his glee when he came up with some sort of wicked plan to get ahead. She couldn't sense any of that delight in him now.

After a little while, Mithril came back to the room, hanging his head despondently.

"Anne, I'm sorry, I..."

“Mithril Lid Pod!”

As soon as she saw him, she rushed over, scooped him into her arms, and hugged him tightly.

“Are you all right? He didn’t do anything awful to you?”

“Anne, did you do as Jonas said? Did Challe Fenn Challe leave? I’m sorry, it’s my fault you had to do that.”

“It was not your fault. Jonas is the bad guy here.”

“But you love Challe Fenn Challe, Anne! Having to tell him to beat it must have been really painful.”

Anne blushed to hear Mithril say that so suddenly. But even as she did, the distress she’d felt the moment she saw Challe turn to leave filled her chest again. She was on the verge of tears, but she held them back.

“What are you talking about? I’ve never mentioned anything about loving Challe, so how would...?”

“You don’t have to hide it. I can tell, Anne. Who exactly do you think I am? I’m the great Mithril Lid Pod! Don’t you dare lump me in with that moron Challe Fenn Challe.”

Anne burst out laughing for a second when she heard Mithril call Challe a moron, even though she still had tears in her eyes.

“A moron, huh? Challe would be angry if he heard you.”

“I mean, he is one. It’s so obvious, so why can’t he see how you feel?”

Now that he mentions it, Mithril may be right. I blush at the way Challe behaves, run away from him, and burst out crying. A normal man would at least be wondering.

If we were talking about Jonas, I’m sure he would have been long convinced that I was interested in him.

“You do love Challe, right?”

It was like Mithril said: Her behavior made it obvious. Anne gave up on denying it and nodded earnestly.

“Mm. Probably.”

Mithril rubbed the spot under his nose. Then he chuckled. “You do? Right, well. Of course you do.” He sounded a bit disappointed. “I knew that already.”

“But it doesn’t matter. Challe already left, so...”

Still holding Mithril in her arms, Anne sat down on the bed.

“I wonder what Jonas is planning to do after separating us from Challe?”

Her apprehension grew. She felt even more anxious without Challe around. She felt helpless, as if someone had thrown her out into wintry weather naked.

She realized how demanding she had been to ask about Liz, and then she burst into tears again.

I’m an idiot.

Maybe Challe was always thinking about the past, but that had nothing to do with her. The most important thing was that he had been at her side, and she should have been glad for it.

She had forgotten that and had longed for more.

Didn’t Hugh say something about that?

“Humans find it difficult to adapt to harsh circumstances but quickly get used to a comfortable environment.”

Without realizing it, Anne had gotten used to having Challe next to her.

I want him with me. That alone was enough. I don’t care what he’s been musing over; I just want him here. Oh Challe, Challe!

There was no way that he could hear her. But she couldn’t stop herself from calling his name over and over again in her heart.

Chapter 5

THE CAPTIVE

Where am I supposed to go now?

The sea to the east was tinted a soft purple by the glow of the rising sun.

Challe Fenn Challe stood at the base of the peninsula, Philax Castle behind him.

In an effort to protect the road from being eroded by the wind and sea, a thicket of evergreen trees had been left standing along the coast. Challe rested in that grove of trees until daybreak, then rose with the morning sun.

He set off down the road, walking at a leisurely pace since he had no purpose.

Snow had fallen the night before, blown in by the strong sea breezes. The narrow road was covered with a thin layer of it.

Challe walked on aimlessly, listening to the rhythmic clashing of the waves. The irritation—the feeling like he'd swallowed a foreign object—had not gone away. It upset him.

Suddenly, Challe sensed murderous intent behind his back. He braced himself and turned around.

There were three men with long swords on their hips. They were walking slowly toward him, as if sizing him up.

Behind them were two fairies, each a head taller than the men, with rugged, dark-red skin. Each had one rumpled excuse for a wing hanging sadly off their

back. They were warrior fairies enslaved by the three men.

These were fairy hunters. They must have been out in the middle of a hunt. Many fairies are born in the morning, so they usually start at sunrise.

When they were close enough to get a clear look at Challe's features, the three hunters came to a stop.

"Look here, we've got a pretty one walking by himself. Today's our lucky day, boys."

One of the men was smirking. The other two circled around Challe, moving behind him and to his left.

Then one of the warrior fairies took a position to his right, and the other fairy stood close to the man who had spoken.

"You have business with me?"

"We don't see many classy pet fairies around here. Who owns you?"

"I asked you first. Answer me. What business do you have with me?"

"A willful one, huh?"

The fairy hunter looked amused.

Challe didn't need to ask to know what they were planning. They were trying to capture him. It might be more accurate to say that they were trying to steal him.

Fairy hunters, as their name suggests, trap and sell fairies. But some particularly nasty ones abduct fairies who already have owners and sell them without permission.

Of course, a stolen fairy's wing remains the possession of its original owner. Even so, there is still one more remaining on a fairy's back. People tie a sturdy cord around that wing and use it as reins to control the fairy.

If the owner sees any improper behavior from the fairy, they pull on the cord and tear off the wing. Fairies weaken if both wings are removed from their backs, even if the two are undamaged. Then, before long, they succumb.

It's an extraordinarily gruesome method of enslavement. But stolen fairies

can't be employed for long anyway. That's because the original owner still has the other wing. If they think the fairy has run off and destroy the wing in retaliation, then the fairy will die. It's not unusual for stolen fairies to die suddenly. It's easiest to sell pet fairies to buyers who aren't particularly worried about how long they will last. These customers are happy just to get some brief entertainment.

Challe had only one wing on his back. Ordinarily, this would mean that he was already owned by someone. The fairy hunters obviously believed that to be the case.

Despite that, given his appearance, they must have expected him to sell for a high price even as a stolen fairy.

"Fairy. Won't you come with us for a minute?"

Challe smiled faintly at the man's words. He quietly opened his right hand and focused his energy there.

Beads of light began gathering in Challe's palm.

"And if I don't go, what will you do?"

The constant, troublesome irritation made Challe belligerent. He flashed a smile. He was going to enjoy this.

"Boss, please be careful. This guy's no pet," one of the warrior fairies informed the man in a nervous voice.

"What does he look like to you, then, if he's not one?"

"He's the same as us. A warrior fairy."

"What?"

Challe was already gripping his sword when the man looked at him in disbelief.

He kicked off the ground and attacked the man in front of him.

A warrior fairy jumped out in front of the dumbfounded man. He unsheathed the hatchet-like blade on his back and deflected Challe's blade.

"You bastard!!"

Challe turned aside skillfully, and the second warrior fairy slashed at his back.

He bent down low and barely avoided the attack. Then he placed his left hand on the ground and jumped up and to the side with a push of his arm. After putting some distance between himself and the fairies, he squared off against the fairy hunters.

One of the warrior fairies groaned. "Boss. He's impossible to catch. Let's withdraw."

Challe sneered. The wing on his back buzzed as it tensed. It was tinged a glossy green color.

"You're the ones who provoked this fight. Stand and face me."

"...Obviously we will. I mean, there's no way we'd let such a valuable fairy get away. But what a stupid thing for you to say! We're the hunters here."

The leader of the fairy hunters drew his sword and backed up bit by bit to a suitable distance while holding his guard.

The remaining two and the warrior fairies caught on to what their leader was doing and gradually surrounded Challe.

Two of the fairy hunters sheathed their swords. From their belts, they drew chains with heavy weights on the ends. They split into front and rear positions, slowly swinging their chains around and taking aim at Challe's legs and arms.

These people weren't fairy hunters for nothing. They had left Challe no openings.

It did not seem like the five of them would go down easily. He shivered with excitement at the thought.

Challe heard the rush of weapons cutting through the air, and the weighted chains flew at him simultaneously from the front and back. A warrior fairy swung their sword down at the spot where Challe would have to twist his body to avoid the chains. Breaking his stance, Challe jumped directly to the side, but one of the chains wrapped around his ankle. It tugged sharply at his leg, and his left hand hit the ground again. He used the momentum to launch an attack against the man who caught hold of him, keeping a low stance as he did so.

He swung his blade up from a position below knee level, aiming for the wrist of the fairy hunter gripping the chain.

The man immediately let go and jumped out of the way.

Despite the chain still tangled around his leg, Challe effortlessly unleashed a flurry of attacks at the fairy hunter, who had been thrown off-balance.

“That’s enough, Challe Fenn Challe.”

He was startled to hear someone call his name.

The fairy hunter, who had avoided Challe’s blade by a hairbreadth, crawled away in retreat.

“I’m sure you’re aware that fairies are executed for killing humans, no matter their reason.”

The fairy hunters hesitated, and they tilted their heads in confusion when they saw a young noble calmly ride his horse over from the direction of the road. Behind him was another young man with dark skin, also on horseback, who appeared to be a bodyguard. Farther in the back were several mounted soldiers.

The fairy hunters did not know the rank of the aristocrat. But they clearly thought it was safest to act discreetly. Each returned his weapons to his belt.

Challe relaxed his stance and, with a cold expression, greeted the young noble who was approaching them.

“You really have a lot of time on your hands, Silver Sugar Viscount.”

“I’m sure I told you what a busy man I am. I see you’re as charmless as ever. Don’t you feel the least bit delighted by our chance reunion?”

Hugh walked his horse right up to Challe and dismounted. Salim also alighted from his and unhurriedly walked around behind Challe. Devoted to protecting his master, he kept his hand on the hilt of his sword and watched Challe carefully.

Hugh announced to the fairy hunters, “I am Hugh Mercury. The Silver Sugar Viscount. Were you all trying to steal this fairy?”

“Don’t be absurd! None of us would have dreamed of it!” The leader of the group bowed obsequiously.

Hugh looked displeased as he waved his hand. “I’ll pretend I didn’t see anything, so hurry up and get lost.”

Once he had driven away the fairy hunters, Hugh looked around at their surroundings. “Oh, are you alone? Where are Anne and Mithril?” he asked.

Challe found the question tremendously unpleasant. He turned his face away from Hugh.

“What happened to the two of them, Challe? They’re not with you? Did something happen?”

For some reason, answering was also upsetting. He thought about Anne, sitting across from him the night before.

“I should be asking what brings you to this place.” Challe replied.

“I came because I have business at Philax Castle. Say, didn’t you go there with Anne? I heard a rumor to that effect in Lewiston, that you all were headed for Duke Alburn’s castle.”

Challe kept his face turned away and held his tongue.

Hugh shrugged. “Don’t feel like answering, huh? Well, that’s just fine. By the way, Challe—”

With a casual gesture, Hugh suddenly extended a hand toward the fairy’s chest. His movements were smooth and agile, characteristic of a candy crafter. Challe was still facing the other way, and because Hugh was so quick, he was caught off guard.

With startling dexterity, Hugh lifted a palm-sized leather pouch from the inside pocket of Challe’s jacket.

“You bastard!”

Hugh jumped several steps back from Challe, who looked like he was ready to raise his sword. “Uh-oh, what’s the matter? That’s not like you, Challe. You’ve left yourself wide open.” He grinned and held up the stolen leather pouch.

Challe ground his back teeth in vexation. “The Silver Sugar Viscount is playing pickpocket now?”



“I’ve been told that I would have made a fine thief if I hadn’t gotten into making candy. It’s a special skill of mine. Even so, I never thought I would be able to steal from you. But it’s odd—just now, you left me an opening. Could it be that you trust me? I’m delighted, Challe.”

Something was wrong. Challe wondered what was preoccupying him and why he had been so inattentive. Or rather, he had only noticed that he was distracted once he had let his guard down in front of Hugh.

Perhaps Anne’s defenselessness had rubbed off on him over the past few months. This was the first time he had been aware of Anne’s influence on him.

“This is your wing, isn’t it?”

The wing that Anne had returned to him was folded up inside the pouch.

“In Highland, when a person finds a fairy with no owner, the first one to get their hands on that fairy’s wing has the right to take possession of them. Well, that’s the rule that the humans came up with anyway. I bet you fairies don’t give a damn either way.”

Hugh had a smirking grin on his face.

“From now on, I am your master, Challe Fenn Challe.”



The next morning, Jonas went to Anne’s room.

“I spoke to Dale and requested a meeting with the Duke of Philax,” he said. “I’m going to see him now. And you’re going to come with me, too, Anne.”

Jonas seemed extremely tense.

She had been feeling somewhat weak since Challe had left the night before.

She was worried, but she couldn’t imagine anything more awful than being forced to reject Challe and watch him leave. So whatever Jonas might be scheming, she didn’t really care. She was in a defiant state of mind.

“You look pale, Jonas,” she said coldly.

Jonas glared sharply at Anne. “You be quiet. You hear me? Shut up!”

It was the reaction of someone at the end of their rope. Cathy sat on Jonas’s shoulder, looking worried and stroking his cheek.

“It’s all right, Master Jonas. It will go well. I’m sure of it.”

Anne was surprised at his behavior. He was not acting like someone in a position of superiority.

Dale came to get Jonas and Anne. He did not show them to the usual reception hall. Instead, he took them to what seemed to be Duke Alburn’s private chambers.

Anne and the others were shown into the sitting room. There was an adjoining bedroom farther in.

A fire burned in the hearth, and the room was warm.

The space was simple, with just a single couch in front of the fireplace and a large desk for official business near the window. There was a thick rug laid out in the center of the floor. It was made of wool and wasn’t particularly extravagant.

These were the apartments of a noble descended from King Cedric. Yet this modest room showed how the Alburn family had been stripped of all authority.

His Royal Highness, living in the castle that towered over Lewiston, and Duke Alburn. The difference was so stark that it didn’t seem like they shared a bloodline.

I wonder how it must feel to make a courtesy call from here to Lewiston every month.

The thought suddenly came to her that if Duke Alburn had been born a fool, he might not feel any agony from it. But if he had even the slightest bit of pride, the visits were certainly a form of cruel humiliation.

Duke Alburn was lying down on the couch, gazing somberly into the flames.

At Dale’s urging, Jonas and Anne knelt down.

When Dale announced their arrival, Duke Alburn flicked his eyes in their direction. Then he said, “Crafters. I don’t suppose your candy sculptures are complete. What did you come here for?”

He spoke to Jonas and Anne in a voice empty of emotion.

Jonas licked his dry lips several times. But then he seemed to have made up his mind, and he opened his mouth.

“I—I, no, we would like you to allow us to quit this job.”

Slowly, Duke Alburn sat up. He turned to face them.

“Quit? You said the same thing to me six days ago, did you not?”

“Y...yes.”

“And what did I tell you then?”

“You said you would not permit that.”

The duke said such a thing?

Anne looked at Jonas’s face in surprise. On the other hand, he did not have the luxury of looking in Anne’s direction.

“That’s right. Did you forget? Just in case you did, allow me to remind you once more of the pain you felt six days ago. I have you two under surveillance. If you try to run away, I will catch you and bind you in chains. I believe I told you that as well.”

Anne was shocked by Duke Alburn’s words as he continued.

Surveillance?! Chains?! What is he talking about?!

Duke Alburn stood up quickly and picked up a narrow sword leaning against the side of the couch.

He didn’t grab the hilt. Instead, he held it casually by the scabbard. He walked toward them as he prepared to raise the sword overhead.

Startled by his actions, Anne stood up and backed away.

That was when she finally understood how Jonas had gotten the bruises on his cheek.

Those were from the duke.

Six days earlier, Jonas had completed his sculpture and called for Duke Alburn. But his work had not been accepted. Just like Anne, Jonas had no doubt been confused. That was when Jonas must have said he wanted to quit. That had provoked Duke Alburn's anger, and he'd beaten Jonas.

He said he's even got us under surveillance. The duke doesn't intend to let us stop working until he's got a candy sculpture that pleases him.

For the first time, Anne was beginning to understand the intensity of the duke's obsession.

Duke Alburn radiated bloodlust as he approached them with sword in hand. Though they were in a warm room, his whole body looked cold, and it even seemed enveloped in a faint blue aura.

Perhaps blue was the color of madness.

A chill ran down Anne's spine.

This man is serious.

Jonas prostrated himself even further.

"I can't do it. That's the truth. Please forgive me!! But she can do it. She's more skilled than I am, many times over. Even the Silver Sugar Viscount recognizes her talent. If you've got her, you don't need me! And you'll have no problem keeping her here in the castle until she makes whatever sugar candy you want. I drove away her bodyguard yesterday. So even if she wanted to quit, she has no way to get out of here. I'm begging you. Please let me leave!"

Anne couldn't believe her own ears as she listened to Jonas rattle on.

He was offering Anne up to Duke Alburn because he wanted to run away.

He had driven Challe away from her for that sole purpose.

"Jonas, you—!"

She started to shout at him, but Jonas seemed to have forgotten all about Anne's presence as he trembled, still prostrating himself on the ground. He looked so frightened that she hesitated.

With gleaming, expressionless eyes and a sword in his hand, Duke Alburn didn't seem sane. Anne half expected him to unsheathe his sword and attack them at any moment.

"Please let me leave. I'm begging you. Please let me go, please let me go home..."

Jonas repeated his request in a trembling voice. He seemed so earnest that Anne kept her complaints to herself.

She even felt pity for the terrified man.

But...what Jonas is saying might be true. It's impossible for him to make sugar candy if he's this frightened.

Jonas had someplace to go back to. Surely, he would have a job as one of the workers in the Radcliffe Workshop if he returned to Lewiston. If he wanted even sweeter treatment, he could go back to his hometown of Knoxberry Village. His parents were waiting for him there, along with a candy shop that he was in line to inherit.

There was no need for someone like him to stubbornly stick it out and make candy for a client who was this dreadful, not to mention unclear about what he wanted.

Anne, on the other hand, had no place to go back to. She had no money. And now she didn't even have Challe.

All things considered, she felt that she had no other option than to stay there and make the sculpture.

Moreover, Anne had already accepted the job. She couldn't abandon it now, no matter the reason. She didn't want to give up on her only talent.

Duke Alburn approached slowly.

Fear swelled up inside Anne. The duke was unpredictable, and he had a sword.

But her path was here, and nowhere else. She understood that instinctively.

Anne swallowed hard. Then she moved to place herself between Duke Alburn and Jonas and took a knee.

“It’s as he says. I will make your sugar candy. So please let this person leave.”

Duke Alburn stood still, and Jonas looked up with surprise. Duke Alburn frowned.

“You will make it, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Are you confident?”

“I am.”

“You’ll be confined to the castle until you complete a candy sculpture that satisfies me. If you can’t do it, you will never be let free.”

“That’s fine,” Anne answered, and then she raised her face to look at Duke Alburn. “I promised you from the beginning. I said I could do it. So I’m going to make it. And if I can’t, that is my responsibility. I’ll keep on making candies for eternity.”

Anne and Duke Alburn scowled at each other briefly. Anne persevered, absolutely unwilling to avert her gaze.

Duke Alburn was the one who slowly turned away. He lowered his sword, still in its scabbard, and his eyes reverted to their usual emotionless calm.

“Very well. I shall permit it. Remove this crafter from the castle.”

“Thank you very much.”

Anne bowed her head again.

As if he had lost interest, Duke Alburn turned his back to them and returned to the couch. He left the sword next to the armrest and turned his eyes to the fire again. The room fell silent. The sound of firewood popping in the hearth echoed loudly.

Jonas looked dazed and deflated.

At Dale’s urging, Anne and Jonas left the room.

He took the two of them back to the tower stairwell. Then he told Jonas to quickly gather his things and leave the castle as soon as he was ready. But he turned a stern eye on Anne.

“You may not leave the castle,” he said. “As you just heard, we have you under surveillance. Attempting to escape is futile.”

“I know that. But Dale, are you sure you should faithfully follow your master’s orders just as they are given? Do you think that’s really the best way to fulfill your loyalties to him as a retainer?”

She couldn’t stop herself from saying it. Duke Alburn’s methods were utterly tyrannical.

A master with an eccentric fixation. Surely, it fell to his retainers to advise him against it. Especially if they took any pride in serving the Alburn house.

Anne looked up at Dale, bracing herself for a blow. But he only chuckled.

“What an impertinent thing to say! However, you are right. We have given him some counsel. But the master... At this point, it’s impossible to dissuade him. We know that, so our top priority is to give the duke anything he desires.”

“Dissuade...?”

“It doesn’t concern you. Listen, the duke wants a candy sculpture. And you’re going to make it.”

“I promised I would, so I’m not going to run away,” Anne said decisively. She started climbing the tower stairs back to her room.

When she reached her door, Jonas came dashing up the stairs behind her in pursuit.

“Anne!”

Anne quickly turned around and silently stuck out her hand.

Jonas blinked several times at her outstretched palm.

“Wh-what?”

“Mithril Lid Pod’s wing. Give it back.”

“Ah, yeah. Right.”

Jonas hastily dug through his breast pocket, pulled out the wing, and placed it in Anne’s hand.

Anne breathed a sigh of relief when she got it back. She gently wrapped her hands around it.

“Thank goodness,” she murmured.

She turned her back to Jonas and was about to enter her room when he grabbed her by the shoulder.

“Wait, Anne! Why did you say those things?!”

“What things? I don’t think I said anything for you to complain about.”

Anne frowned and faced Jonas again.

“I’m not complaining. But why were you so assertive in telling him to let me go? I never expected you to say something like that. Why did you speak up for me?”

“I didn’t do it for you. When I saw the state you were in, I knew you were truly in no condition to be making sugar candy. So there’s no point in you being here. That’s all.”

“But does that mean you’re saying you can make a candy sculpture for the duke?! No matter what you do, he just spouts nonsense, and he’s never satisfied! Plus, he even said he’ll lock you up in here forever unless you create something that pleases him!!”

“I told him from the start that I would do it. That’s why I don’t want to quit halfway through.”

Jonas took his hand off Anne’s shoulder and whined like a spoiled child. “You must be a fool! What are you saying?! This isn’t normal!”

“Listen. Right now, I don’t have any other option but to stay here and make the candy sculpture.”

That was reality, and that was how she really felt.

Lips trembling, Jonas shouted, “You really are a fool!” Then he ran down the stairs.

“I sure am, no doubt about it.” Anne sighed, and she grumbled to herself. “But other than that, there’s nothing else I can do.”

Even if she gave up on the job and fled the castle like Jonas, Challe was gone. She would never see him again. When she thought about that, she felt her chest tighten.

She didn't want to think about it. Instead, she decided to worry about sugar candy.

Just then, the words that Challe had once whispered to her rang in her ears.

"Make the candy. It's something you can do."

Make the candy... That's right. I just need to make the candy.

I'll create a sugar sculpture that Duke Alburn will approve. Then I'll gain money and fame.

With a thousand cress, I can stay in inns and travel in relative safety. That way I can travel throughout the kingdom, searching for Challe. And when I manage to find him, I'll explain. I'll explain that when I told him I wanted him to leave, I didn't really mean it. I only did it because I was threatened. I'll tell him that I actually want us to be together.

She looked up, determination on her face.

"There's something that I can do."



"I really do think you're wasting your good looks."

The most historic hotel in Philax was a three-story brick building that looked out onto the harbor. The top floor had only three rooms, which were more spacious than those on the lower levels.

Hugh had apparently rented out the whole third floor.

One room was for his own use. He had assigned the six soldiers acting as his bodyguards, who had accompanied him from Westol, to the other two rooms. He must have arrived in the port city a little while ago, because he was still

wearing simple traveling clothes.

Once he was in his suite, he cleansed his body in the bath and put on his formal attire. He didn't seem to have any servant fairies traveling with him, so Salim helped him get dressed.

Challe was in Hugh's room. Since Hugh had stolen his wing, Challe had no choice but to listen to his orders.

But Challe didn't pay him any particular mind. He didn't care what Hugh had been thinking when he had snatched his wing, or what his plans were.

In the room were six luxurious chairs, their seats upholstered with rare cloth from the continent. Challe was sulking in one of them, leaning against the back with his legs crossed. He seemed determined to remain right where he was, without displaying a shred of charm.

"I'm your master, you know? Don't you think you could be a little bit more sociable? I'm not telling you to come snuggle up by my side, but you could at least fix that miserable look on your face."

Hugh stepped out from behind a partition, fastening his cuffs. He sat down across from Challe with the table in between them. Challe glared sharply at Hugh.

"Did Anne run away from you because you were making scary faces like that?"

Angered by Hugh's words, Challe plunked a leg down on top of the table.

Hugh swatted the tip of the boot that was pointed in his direction.

"What's this? Why the foot?"

"Leg's tired."

"I get it. I get that you're pissed off. Now what actually happened?"

Challe didn't feel like answering. So he didn't, and Hugh asked calmly, "Is Anne still in Philax Castle? If she is, we've got to get her out of there. If I fail to persuade Alburn, Philax Castle will find itself under siege."

Challe frowned, and Hugh seemed satisfied by his reaction.

“Come. I’m going to head there now to meet Alburn. You’re my warrior fairy, so I’ll take you with me as a bodyguard.”

“I don’t feel like going,” Challe responded.

Hugh put his hand into his inner breast pocket. “I’ve got your wing in here. I’d rather not stoop to this, but if you don’t want to listen to me, I can inflict some damage on it.”

“I suppose you are human,” Challe grumbled.

Humans would squeeze tightly on their fairies’ wings or pull them with enough force to tear them apart. When that happened, fairies experienced pain and terror so excruciating that it was as if every nerve in their body was being twisted, as though the very bonds of their flesh were being split, and they might be obliterated in an instant.

It was agony and fear that humans could not comprehend.

“Sorry, pal. I’m human through and through. If you understand, come on.”

Hugh stood up and ordered Salim, “I’m ready. Prepare a carriage. We’re headed for Philax Castle.”

Hugh had apparently rushed from Westol to Philax with great haste.

Traveling by carriage would have taken too much time, so the Viscount had ridden to the port city on horseback with Salim and only six bodyguards accompanying him.

Hugh said he’d overheard a rumor that Anne had gone to Philax Castle when he was passing through Lewiston.

“That’s why I was in such an awful hurry.”

Hugh had borrowed a luxurious four-horse carriage that he said belonged to a trader, and now they were headed for Philax Castle. Apparently, it would have been improper for the Viscount to visit a duke on horseback, no matter the circumstances. So Hugh, Salim, and Challe all rode in the carriage.

Gazing out the window at the ocean, Hugh muttered, “For the past year and a half, the Duke of Philax, Duke Alburn, hasn’t shown his face in Lewiston once.”

Not even once?

In spite of himself, Challe looked Hugh in the face.

The power struggles of the human world were inconsequential to Challe.

But when it came to the issues of the royal family, anyone living in Highland was bound to hear something, whether they were interested or not. So as a matter of course, Challe knew about the relationship between House Millsland and House Alburn, as well as the situation of the Alburn family's head.

Hugh stared back at Challe and nodded.

“Even you understand what this means, right?”

The head of House Alburn was the last smoldering seed of conflict in the kingdom. To prove that the duke was behaving himself, he was expected to collect taxes for the royal family from all the merchants. Additionally, he was expected to travel to the royal capital once a month to pay a courtesy call to the king. Those were the two obligations imposed on the duke.

It was a ritual aimed at demonstrating continued allegiance to the king and showing that he had no intention of disobeying the crown.

And the duke had been neglecting this duty for a year and a half.

“I was often summoned by Alburn before I became the Silver Sugar Viscount. I made a lot of sugar candies for him...or actually for the woman by his side. I'm familiar with the duke's temperament, and I also know quite well that he is unconcerned with ambition. But the Earl of Downing is different. The earl has never stopped looking for an opportunity to eradicate the whole Alburn family. The duke's temperament is irrelevant to him. He sees the very existence of the head of House Alburn as problematic. As long as the duke collected the taxes, though, it wasn't an immediate issue. His Majesty, Edmond II, has also been protecting House Alburn. But it's been a year and a half. Now that he's been neglecting his duty to greet the king for this long, even His Majesty cannot hold the earl's opinion in check. Alburn has repeatedly ignored his summons. No one knows why he suddenly stopped coming to Lewiston. But...”

Hugh paused a moment, then continued.

“This is a golden opportunity for the Earl of Downing. He’s not going to wait any longer. Even His Majesty can’t protect Alburn now, and he has given the Earl of Downing permission to subdue him. Hence why he’s coming to Philax and bringing the soldiers of Westol Castle.”

Extinguishing the last live coal, huh?

Typical human behavior and way of doing things. Thorough and ruthless.

That’s probably how they triumphed over the fairies.

“Alburn can still fix this if he goes to Lewiston before the earl arrives. His Majesty can come up with grounds for his protection. But there’s no time to waste. The Earl of Downing moves fast for someone his age. Hopefully, I can persuade Alburn before he gets here, but—”

Hugh turned his gaze toward the window again. He looked uncharacteristically distressed.

“Why did you come to persuade him? Was it an order from the king?”

“His Majesty isn’t the type to work behind the scenes, especially not to undercut his own edicts. No, this was my own decision. I owe Alburn an old debt. I don’t want to see him die, so I’m going to try and get him to hurry to Lewiston to fulfill his obligations, that’s all. Ever since I became Silver Sugar Viscount, I had to stop making sugar candy for anyone besides His Majesty, and I’ve lost touch with the duke, but...I do wonder if something happened since I last saw him.”

Hugh had come here out of concern for Duke Alburn, a man who harbored a cold, unnerving stillness behind his eyes and seemed possessed by a strange obsession. It was surprising. Challe wondered whether a man like that was worth worrying about.

When they arrived at Philax Castle, the carriage went straight through the gate. Apparently, their visit had been announced ahead of time. Hugh took Salim and Challe with him, and they headed into the castle keep.

When Challe stepped inside, he noted that there was no sign of Anne anywhere. Part of him felt that he wanted to see her, while the other part felt that he didn’t. If he saw her once more, he might be able to ask her for the

reason she had rejected him.

The three of them were not shown to the reception hall but to Duke Alburn's private chambers. Probably because this was not an official visit, and because Alburn and Hugh still had a friendly relationship.

Duke Alburn was sitting on a couch in front of the fireplace. He looked toward Hugh and the others when he sensed the door opening, but he did not stand up.

He sounded bored as he grumbled, "And who should it be but Mercury? It's been two years."

"I regret my long absence, Duke." Hugh couldn't hide the surprise on his face as he greeted him. "You've lost a lot of weight... You must be working very hard."

"I have no use for you now that you don't make sugar candy for anyone but the king. What did you come here for?"

"I came to extend an invitation. Would you care to go on an excursion with me? Our destination is Lewiston. I'd say the round trip would take us about three or four days."

"You too, huh? Dale's also been saying that, over and over. I have no intention of going there."

"It'll be fun."

"Will it, now?"

"Of course it will. And Lady Christina can come with us, too. I know she enjoys the bustle of the royal capital. Where is she?"

The fire in the hearth was reflected in Duke Alburn's eyes. The man didn't move.

"Duke?"

"Leave me."

Hugh shrugged and dropped the lighthearted attitude he'd had so far. He approached Duke Alburn with determination, took a knee at his feet, and

looked up at him.

“Duke. You have neglected to offer greetings to His Majesty for a year and a half. Surely, you must understand what that means? The Earl of Downing is preparing troops and heading here at this very moment. His Majesty has granted the earl permission to subjugate you. But that is not what the king really desires. Even now, if you demonstrate your allegiance, His Majesty will protect you. He holds great affection for you and for your late father, as do I.”

“Leave.”

“Duke!”

“I told you to get out!”

Duke Alburn suddenly stood up and grabbed his sword, which was sitting nearby.

Hugh, not surprisingly, sprang to his feet and retreated several steps. Salim quickly positioned himself in front of Hugh and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. Challe was also on guard and watched to see what would happen.

“You’re... What happened to you, Duke?”

Hugh couldn’t hide the shock in his voice.

Still gripping his sword, Duke Alburn growled, “No one gives me orders. Don’t tell me what I ought to do. That goes for you, too, Mercury.”

“...Understood.” Hugh nodded and gave a small sigh. “We’ll go,” he said. “But I have one request. I believe that a candy crafter by the name of Anne Halford is staying in this castle. I’d like to take her back with me.”

“I don’t know her.”

“She’s a young girl who entered this castle with the fairy who’s standing over there.”

“Certainly, there were several crafters who came here with fairies. But I expelled them all. There’s not a single candy crafter in this castle.”

That can’t be true.

Challe had seen Anne in the castle just the night before. He had been nearby

until that morning, so if she had left, he would have known immediately. Anne was still here. As further proof, her boxy wagon remained parked in the outer enclosure of the castle.

“Are you sure about that?”

Hugh exchanged looks with Challe, who glanced at him as if to ask, *Is the duke telling the truth?*

The fairy shook his head slightly, giving his answer, *No.*

“How tedious. Leave me, Mercury.”

That was all Duke Alburn said before returning to the couch again. He threw the sword down onto the floor and hung his head in both hands, fingers entwined in his blond hair, as if he was enduring an awful headache.

Hugh bowed silently to Duke Alburn, who was not looking his way, then turned on his heel and walked away. Salim followed after, with Challe the last to leave.

Before shutting the door, he turned to look one more time at Duke Alburn, who was still in the same position.

He was hiding Anne’s presence here in the castle. Challe wondered what exactly Duke Alburn was looking for in his sugar candy. Regardless of what the duke wanted, Challe was concerned for Anne’s safety. He wondered what that petite, stubborn girl was doing right about now.

What could she be up to?

Challe was impatient; he felt the urge to go searching for her right then. However...

“Don’t come back again. Don’t come back to me.”

...he recalled Anne’s words.

She rejected me, so why am I thinking about going to look for her?

I don’t feel any obligation toward her. I owe her no debts. But why do I want to find her in spite of that? Am I feeling anxious out of concern for her? I want to see Anne again, regardless of how she feels about me.



Jonas had left the castle.

After watching him leave from the window of her room in the tower, Anne went straight to the reception hall with Mithril. She stood there, staring at the portrait of the fairy for a long while.

The room was so cold that she lost feeling in her toes and fingers.

Mithril was sitting on the floor, yawning widely. Nonetheless, he patiently kept Anne company. She had told him he could go back to the room, but he had refused and insisted on staying with her.

The sun was beginning to set, and through the windows of the reception hall, streaks of orange light illuminated the floor.

“Why this portrait, I wonder?”

Anne was exhausted from constantly staring at the painting. Her exhaustion made her speak those words suddenly and without thinking.

“Why not? Isn’t it pretty good?”

Mithril looked up at the portrait, as if he also didn’t really understand.

“But why? There are plenty of beautiful paintings in the world. Why this specific one?”

“It doesn’t have to be this picture, does it?” Mithril asked. “There are more in the East Tower, right?”

“Mm, maybe. The duke did say that he wanted me to sculpt the fairy depicted in this painting, not the painting itself. But then why this fairy?”

The beams of sunlight shining in through the windows grew longer and longer. They crept across the floor, reaching Anne’s feet and shining on the portrait before her.

The early-evening light illuminated the back of the fairy in the portrait.

“Ah!!”

Anne was astounded.

Why didn't I notice it until now? Well, I did. But I didn't think it was anything important. Though considering it more carefully, this is really incredible!

"Two wings... This fairy has two wings on her back. She was never owned by anyone."

"So what does that mean?"

"Why does the duke have a portrait of a fairy like that? A fairy born in nature who was never enslaved and assimilated into the human world. Ordinarily, it would be unthinkable."

"Now that you mention it, you're right."

"Why does the model for my sugar candy have to be this fairy? I haven't heard a reason for it. Maybe there's something special about her. Maybe the duke has a special memory of her...and because of that, he's not satisfied with my candy sculpture. If I can get him to tell me, I might be able to find some direction for my work."

That's it. Didn't Challe mutter something about this one night when he was staring at the portrait?

"Perhaps the Duke of Philax isn't asking for a splendid work of sugar art?" he said. And he was right.

Anne had been ignoring the hint that Challe had given her.

There was no need for a candy sculpture that would look perfect to a candy crafter like Anne. What she needed to make was something that looked perfect in Duke Alburn's eyes.

"Are you out of your mind, Anne?" Mithril shuddered. "I mean, Jonas ran away trembling with fear. If that duke objects to you asking, he could beat you senseless... Actually, given how violent he is, he might even cut you down on the spot!"

"But if I don't ask, I'll never know."

Though even if she did ask, Anne wasn't confident that she could create something that would satisfy Duke Alburn. He seemed to have lost his grip on

sanity. There was probably danger in trying.

“Hey, Mithril Lid Pod?” Anne crouched in front of him and peered at his face. “It would be all right for you to leave the castle, too.”

Mithril stood up, fuming. “You must be kidding! I, for one, could never run away!”

Anne gently clasped his two little hands between her fingertips.

“But when I think about the fact that you might be facing danger, I can’t help but be worried for you. After all, this is a job that I accepted, and it’s my responsibility. I’m also choosing to remain here of my own volition, so I don’t want to drag you into it.”

“Anne...”

She gave the fairy a beaming smile. “It’s all right! I’m going to make the duke his sugar candy. If you say that you’re going to wait for me, then wait somewhere in town. I’m absolutely going to walk out of this castle with a thousand cress in my hand.”

Mithril stared at Anne as if he was trying to decode her feelings. He seemed to understand that she had not made her declaration recklessly.

This was Anne’s job. Her pride as a candy crafter was on the line, so she could not possibly abandon her assignment.

Mithril nodded. “I understand.” His blue eyes became serious. “I’ll leave the castle. While I’m gone, I’ll spend the time waiting for you searching for Challe Fenn Challe. Then I’ll tell him that you didn’t mean those things you said, and bring him back.”

“You’ll do that for me? But Challe may have already gone far away.”

“I’ll track him down. I’m the great Mithril Lid Pod, after all! Leave it to me.”

The small fairy threw out his chest and jutted out his chin proudly. Anne was delighted just to hear him say that.

“Thank you. I can always depend on you, Mithril Lid Pod.”

She thanked him from the bottom of her heart.

Chapter 6

THE FAIRY IN MY MEMORIES

“I would like to request an audience with the duke.”

After releasing Mithril Lid Pod from the castle, Anne petitioned Dale.

“For what purpose? The duke will be displeased if he is troubled without good reason.”

Now that Anne was the only remaining candy crafter, Dale’s treatment of her had grown harsh. His tone was obviously different from when he was treating her as one crafter among many. Anne could sense that he was determined to see her complete a candy sculpture for Duke Alburn by any means possible.

“This is necessary. Please, grant me an audience. And I’d like to be alone with the duke if possible.”

Dale seemed to understand that Anne was serious. He made the arrangements for the meeting.

Once the sun set completely, the temperature dropped even further. Looking out the window, Anne could see snow blowing in the fierce wind.

She was shown to Duke Alburn’s heated private chambers.

Duke Alburn was lying in the same spot and in the same posture as that morning. She wondered if he had been like this all day. And if perhaps this was how he spent most of his time.

He looked lethargic and hollow. Anne wondered why a man like him was so fixated on a piece of sugar candy.

No, Duke Alburn's not fixated on the candy. It's the fairy in that portrait.

I want to ask him the reason for his obsession. Then I can give form to his desires.

That was Anne's job as a candy crafter.

"Thank you very much for allowing me this meeting," she said, kneeling before the duke.

Duke Alburn didn't so much as look in her direction. "What is the purpose of this meeting?" he asked.

"There are things that I would like to ask you in order to make the candy sculpture. Would that be all right?"

"If it's for the sake of the sculpture, you may."

"All right..."

After quietly catching her breath, Anne asked, "Please tell me the name of the person in those portraits."

It must have been a very unexpected question, because Duke Alburn turned to look at her. It was as if he were seeing her for the first time.

"Why do you need her name?"

"So that I can sculpt her. I think I must know it. And know more than what is depicted in the portrait."

"And then you can make her?"

"I'm not sure."

Suddenly, Duke Alburn grabbed the sword that was leaning against the couch nearby. He smoothly unsheathed it then rose, holding the exposed blade.

Anne resisted her instinctual urge to back away. She forced herself to stifle her fear, but her knees began trembling slightly.

Duke Alburn stood in front of Anne, the sword dangling from his hand. "The question that you just asked treads on my memories. Did you prepare yourself before asking it? If you trespass and disturb my memories, and then still fail to make what I want, I shall make you pay with your life. Have you readied

yourself for that?”

“I cannot resign myself to death. I will not die. I’ve made a promise to a friend. And there’s something I want to say to someone. So I will not die. I’m resolved not to, and I swear I will make your sculpture. So please tell me. Tell me her name.”

They glared at each other. Duke Alburn placed the blade upon Anne’s shoulder.

She flinched slightly at the feeling of the heavy, cold steel.

“...Christina,” Duke Alburn whispered.

“That’s her name?”

“Correct.”

“But if she’s a fairy, she ought to have an original name. Do you know it?”

“Lealis Cil Eril.”

When the fairy’s name came out of Duke Alburn’s mouth, Anne was convinced.

I knew it. She’s someone special.

Humans who enslave fairies do not care about their original names. The only ones who do are the humans who see fairies as their equals. And those who see their fairies as precious.

Anne understood that very well. She felt the same way.

“Why don’t you call her by her original name?”

“That was what she desired. She asked me to give her a name because she wanted me to call her by a human name.”

At that point, Duke Alburn withdrew the sword from Anne’s shoulder and slumped down in a nearby chair. He looked too exhausted to keep standing.

“Where did you meet her? Lady Christina, I mean.”

Anne deliberately called the fairy by her human name. Once she heard that the fairy herself had preferred that, she figured she ought to do so.

“On the seashore. At a beach below the cliffs of this castle.”

“What was Lady Christina doing there?”

“She had just been born. She was sitting there vacantly, staring at the cresting waves from which she had come.”

“If she had stayed there like that, Lady Christina would have been discovered by fairy hunters, wouldn’t she?”

“That’s why I brought her back to the castle.”

“What made you do that?”

“The thought of her being captured and hurt by human hands was too terrible.”

“Were you together for a long time?”

“Three years.”

“Where is Lady Christina now?”

“One year ago...she vanished. She said it was the end of her life span.”

Duke Alburn stared at a single point on the floor as he mumbled his answer.

He loved her.

Anne projected her own feelings onto what she saw in Duke Alburn. Like him, she was also calling out the name of a particular fairy in her heart. He must have been calling out his fairy’s name in the same way.

“She always told me that water fairies cannot predict their own life spans. Some live hundreds of years, while others disappear after only a few.”

Is that why he had so many portraits painted?

That explained the numerous pictures that decorated the reception hall and the tower.

They were his attempt to hold on to someone, even though he wasn’t sure when she would disappear. He must have had dozens and dozens of portraits painted. He had been afraid that she would vanish.

The fairy smiling in the portrait looked somewhat anxious. She had probably

been worried about what would happen to her lover once she was gone.

At last, Anne could see the shape of their emotions.

She wondered why she hadn't thought to ask about those feelings from the start.

I feel like I really took a roundabout way to get here. I realize now how inexperienced I am. If Hugh were doing this job, I'm sure he would have asked Duke Alburn why he wanted the sculpture right at the start.

Anne had only been thinking of making a beautiful sugar candy that she could be satisfied with.

She hadn't understood what her client truly wanted.

Duke Alburn wasn't looking for a splendid work of art. He just wanted a likeness of Christina, a memento that reproduced her looks exactly as they had been.

Even using the most realistic techniques, making sugar candy sculptures always involved adjusting the balance of color, shape, and contour in order to achieve an attractive result when turning something into candy art. But Anne couldn't do that; rather, she wasn't allowed to. A lifelike sculpture would not be a very good piece of art, but that was what Duke Alburn wanted.

She was brimming with the desire to create it. She wanted to show Duke Alburn a statue of the fairy who lived in his heart, the fairy he yearned for just as she yearned for Challe.

"Do you mind if I bring my silver sugar here?"

"What?"

"I'm bringing my silver sugar to your room. I'm going to take the liberty of working right in front of you, Duke. And I'll sculpt her as I listen to you tell me about her. I want to hear about the colors of Lady Christina's hair, skin, and eyes. Tell me about her expressions and her movements. I will make the sugar candy while listening to everything."



“This is bad.”

When he returned from Philax Castle, Hugh threw his jacket down on the table as soon as he got back to his room in the inn. Then he flopped down into a chair. Challe stood by the wall, leaning against it and looking out the window.

It was already pitch-dark outside. Snow was dancing around furiously in the strong wind.

“There have been rumors of his bizarre behavior, but to think it has become that bad... And it worries me that Christina is not with him.”

“His lover?”

At Challe’s question, Hugh pushed his bangs back as he let out a heavy sigh and looked up at the ceiling. “I guess she is,” he replied. “She’s a fairy, though.”

Challe frowned at the word *fairy*.

“A fairy with blue hair?”

“That’s right. Did you see her at the castle?”

“I saw a portrait of her. The man was ordering the candy crafters to make sugar sculptures using it as a model.”

“Using a picture as a model instead of the woman herself? Why...?” Then as if he had suddenly realized something, Hugh turned to look at the obsidian fairy. “Challe. Do you know the life span of fairies born from the sea?”

“It varies. Fairies born from the sea are water sprites. Some of them live for hundreds of years, while others vanish after a few.”

Even water sprites themselves do not know their own life spans. They live with that uncertainty from the moment they are born.

Mithril was also a water sprite. Surely he, too, was aware of the unpredictability. His bossy attitude was likely an effort to cope with that anxiety. He had never discussed the issue of his life span with Anne, and even if

he had, he probably would have made some baseless claim that he would outlive Challe or something.

“What about sugar candy?” Hugh asked. “I thought fairies could live longer if they kept eating it.”

“It’s rare to come across sugar candy that has the power to extend your life span. Your candy might just do it, but even so, it would be just for a few extra weeks or months. And if you don’t keep eating it, it doesn’t do anything.”

“I see... If that’s the case, she must have vanished. And the duke is...”

Challe snorted when he heard those words. “You mean that man is acting like that because his fairy lover passed? Humans care that much about the disappearance of a single pet fairy? Surely, he can buy a replacement and be satisfied with that?”

“She wasn’t a pet. No one can ever replace her...” Hugh clenched his fist on top of the table.

“House Alburn has never rebelled against House Millsland. Not only that, but during the Chamber Rebellion, they fought on the side of His Majesty. And what did they get for it? Did the duke you just saw look like a noble descended from the bloodline of King Cedric, or a descendant of the heroes who fought to build the peaceful reign of the present monarch? All the taxes that come from trade are eaten up by the royal family, and he only receives a stipend from that. And he’s obligated to pay his respects once a month. That’s the poor treatment his family received after the civil war, when they ought to have received a commendation for their contributions. The duke would have been twelve or thirteen years old at the time. How he must resent the way his family was unjustly punished just as he was on the verge of becoming a man. The shock must have been especially strong for a child. But he and his father obeyed. They kept their anger in check, prioritized the stability of the kingdom, and resigned themselves to their duties. There was no one who could alleviate his anger and his bitter feelings. No one except for her.”

Challe smirked, as if to throw Hugh’s pointed look right back at him. “A partner to absorb all his resentment? I’m sure that fairy must have been very happy.”

“Yes, I think she was happy.” Hugh glared at Challe, challenging his sarcastic statement, before continuing. “Before I became the Silver Sugar Viscount, I made many sugar candies for the duke. I heard that they were all for her, actually; she told me so herself. She said she wanted to extend her life span, even just a little bit. For the duke’s sake.”

Extend her life? For the duke?

In her portraits, the fairy had always been wearing a smile tinged with worry. What had she been concerned about? The question welled up inside Challe.

“She was probably worried that something like this would happen.”

After he said that, Hugh fell silent. The windows rattled in the strong wind.

As they were sitting there, Salim entered the room. “Viscount, a message has come through from the guard stationed along the highway,” he anxiously announced. “The Earl of Downing has entered Philax in the company of over three hundred mounted troops. It seems he will arrive at Philax Castle shortly.”

Hugh clicked his tongue and stood up. “That old man. I wish he would relax and act his age.” He glanced at Challe. “Let’s go back. The earl is quick tempered. He’ll launch an attack if the duke doesn’t surrender. There should be two or three hundred of the Alburn house guards stationed throughout Philax Castle. Anne will be in danger if a brawl breaks out.”

Challe felt conflicted over whether he should save Anne when he thought about how she had rejected him.

But he also couldn’t stand there and do nothing. So he went with Hugh to the castle.

A strong wind blew across the stormy sea, and the echo of breaking waves was loud. The snow that fell on their cheeks stung like tiny pebbles bouncing off their skin.

In the raging evening storm, the huge silhouette of Philax Castle was illuminated by flickering lights. Three hundred horsemen holding torches were on the cape. In the light of their flames, fanned by the wind, the shape of the castle seemed to sway right and left.

“Earl of Downing!”

The army had pitched its tents along the hilly road to the cape from the highway. While not completely blown away by the strong wind, the tents were nevertheless bent and greatly warped.

Hugh barged into one of them, and the Earl of Downing looked shocked to see him.

“Mercury?”

“Has Philax Castle surrendered?” Hugh asked, catching his breath.

The Earl of Downing gave a cynical smile.

“They closed the gates and barricaded themselves inside. We demanded they surrender, but a messenger came to ask us to wait a little while. It’s not clear how long that’ll be, though. Mercury, it looks like your attempts at persuasion have failed.”

“You knew about that?”

Hugh forced an awkward smile.

“We made you Silver Sugar Viscount knowing full well that there was a connection between you and House Alburn, after all. I speculated you would at least go try to talk sense into him.”

At that point, the Earl of Downing turned a strict eye on Hugh. “But I won’t let you do anything further. Don’t interfere. I must extinguish the last smoldering ember of conflict in the kingdom.”

“I won’t interfere. But Anne Halford is inside the castle.”

“Halford?”

“The girl who competed for the royal medal at the last Royal Candy Fair.”

“Oh...um...”

For a moment, the Earl of Downing’s eyes widened. But then he shook his head. “That is unfortunate. All we can do is pray that she is well hidden if this leads to an engagement.”

Even the Earl of Downing had no desire to allow an innocent girl to die. But he

had a sense of duty. He concluded that in the fulfillment of that duty, the death of a single girl might be unavoidable. He was an old retainer who had lived through the civil war and worked to build stability in the kingdom. He didn't need to weigh one girl's life against his sense of obligation.

"But—"

Hugh leaned over the table, ready to argue his case to the earl again.

Challe let out a puff of breath and turned his back to Hugh. He left the tent. No matter how much Hugh insisted, Challe could tell it was impossible. Nothing the Viscount could say would change the old aristocrat's mind.

The wind blew fiercely. Challe could see the dim outline of the castle through a curtain of snow.

Challe balled both hands into fists as he looked up at the citadel.

"She's in there..."

He knew he had to go to the castle immediately and retrieve her.

But he thought she would probably refuse a helping hand if it came from him. He could not be the one to go.

He wondered whether he ought to bow his head to Salim and ask him to enter the castle and get her out before the battle began.

While Hugh was thinking it over, Salim walked over from a group of the earl's soldiers with perfect timing. A small can with a handle was dangling from his hand.

When he saw Challe outside the tent, Salim went straight toward him. "One of the soldiers apparently caught him earlier this evening," he said abruptly, without even a greeting. Then he held the can out toward Challe. It was a personal canteen—the type that could have been hung from any soldier's belt—useful for holding beans, stew, and other foods that might be dished out.

Challe frowned. He obviously did not understand.

"I've seen this one before. I think he's an acquaintance of yours. Open it up," Salim urged him.

Challe didn't understand what was going on, but thus encouraged, he took it and opened the lid.

A small fairy was snugly sealed inside. He couldn't believe his own eyes.

"Mithril Lid Pod?"

"Challe Fenn Challe?"

They stared at each other for a while, dumbfounded by their surprise reunion.

"Apparently, he ate all the soup that was inside. They said the soldier who found him shut him inside, out of revenge for his empty stomach. He was trying to sell him off to anyone who would take him. I was approached and asked if I was interested in buying him as I passed by," Salim explained matter-of-factly.

"What are you doing? You left the castle and ate a soldier's dinner?"

Mithril crawled out of the can looking the worse for wear and protested Challe's deeply disgusted words. "No, that's not it! Well it is, but that's not all of it! I was trying to fulfill my task. But I got hungry, and I thought I would nourish myself with a meal first. I don't know what's going on, but there are lots of soldiers here, so I figured no one would be able to tell if I just ate a little something."

"You left the castle on your own and stole a soldier's soup to eat? What about her?"

"Oh yeah, Anne!"

Mithril flapped his one wing and sprung up nimbly to sit on Challe's shoulder.

"Anne is still in the castle. The duke doesn't plan to let her out until she makes a candy sculpture that pleases him. So Anne asked me to wait for her out here."

"So you did as you were told and left on your own?"

"Listen, I thought I would have to go hunting for you." Tears steadily welled up in Mithril's eyes. "Anne is calling for you. She wants you to come back to her."

Those words sounded hollow to Challe, and his mood soured.

"Are you stupid? What are you saying? She's the one who told me to scram.

There's no way she's calling for me now."

"You're the stupid one!"

"I will not stand to be called that by the likes of you!"

"In that case, let me say it a few more times!! Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid!!"

Mithril tugged roughly on a section of Challe's hair.

"Do you think Anne was serious when she told you to leave?! Our Anne?! She was forced to say it after that bastard Jonas took my wing and threatened her. Jonas separated you from Anne, then offered her up to the Duke of Philax. All so he could escape!"

"...What?"

Challe was stunned. He couldn't believe it.

Jonas threatened her?

"I'm telling you! Anne only drove you away because of that!"

She did it after she had been crying. So...

Challe was uncharacteristically dumbfounded.

To think, he had been so upset, but the reality was that she had only sent him away under duress.

"So then...what is she doing right now?"

"I told you, didn't I?! She's making sugar candy! Anne said herself that she won't leave until she creates a piece of candy that pleases the Duke of Philax. She wants to make that sculpture, no matter the cost."

Challe remained stunned only for a moment. Mithril's words awoke a terrible urgency inside him.

That fool! She stayed put after all that? She's making sugar candy even now?!

Challe grabbed hold of Mithril, who was sitting on his shoulder making a squawking racket and yanking at his hair.

"Wh-what's this?! Hey, Challe Fenn Challe! Let me go!"

He shoved Mithril straight back into the can and forced it into Salim's hands.

“Wait here! I’ll come get him later!”

Then he broke into a run.



Salim shrugged and looked down disinterestedly at the can containing the fairy.

“Why should I have to hold on to this?”

“What do you mean?! I am the great Mithril Lid Pod! Now let me out of here at once—!”

Mithril shouted from inside the can.



One barrel of silver sugar. Fully kneaded and ready to be worked. From that emerged a rough human figure, a little taller than Anne.

Duke Alburn looked at it and muttered, “Crafter. What do you intend to do?”

Anne turned around to look at Duke Alburn with a serious expression.

“About how tall was Lady Christina?” she asked.

“How tall?” After thinking about it for a moment, Alburn stood. He stood in front of the vaguely human-shaped mass of silver sugar and pointed to his own chin. “About this high.”

“All right. That’s what we’ll go with.”

Stretching up tall, Anne took another lump of silver sugar in her hand. Sugar candy sculptures weren’t usually that large. But she believed that this one needed to be.

“I asked you what your intentions are, crafter.”

“I’m making the sculpture look identical to her. In every way. Her height, her face, her expression, everything’s going to be spot-on. When you call up memories of Lady Christina, what image of her comes to mind the most? In my case, when I think of a certain someone...I remember him looking down at me, in somewhat of a bad mood, for example.”

After thinking it over briefly, Duke Alburn cast his eyes downward and softly

answered, “She’s relaxed, standing and leaning against a wall. She’s looking at me with a smile on her face.”

“Got it.”

If Anne were trying to make an attractive sculpture, she would never use such a pose. But her goal was to create the image of Christina that Duke Alburn wanted. Whether it would be an eye-catching work of art was irrelevant.

Once Anne had determined the fairy’s pose, she set about adding the details. Five barrels of silver sugar were carried to Duke Alburn’s private chambers. Besides the sugar, one barrel full of cold water and one workbench had been brought in. Additionally, over one hundred vials of colored powder had been carried down from Anne’s room and were lined up on the floor.

Anne was kneading more silver sugar on top of a stone slab that had been placed on the floor. It was absolutely not something one did in the private chambers of an aristocrat. But Duke Alburn had approved it.

Anne could already envision the colors and mood of the piece.

When he’d looked at the first sculpture that Anne had made, Duke Alburn had said, “The overall feel of it is just right.” Christina’s presence, which Anne had picked up on from her portraits, was the one thing she hadn’t gotten wrong. She kept that in mind as she worked. She had also managed to sculpt Christina’s features perfectly once before.

But she did have to be careful not to add any of her own embellishments that would make the candy stand out.

Holding a wooden spatula that had the end split into fine sections like a brush, Anne stood tiptoe. She used it to sculpt Christina’s flowing hair.

With just the same amount of force as if she were brushing real hair, she quickly etched long, smooth lines from the top of the head down to the waist. Over and over, she carved the finest of lines, repeating the movement hundreds, if not thousands of times.

She etched it again and again to give the observer the impression that the hair was soft to the touch.

Alburn watched with great interest as Anne continued her work, and he looked at the fairy that was being produced from her fingertips.

Anne had no idea how much time passed. She was certain that the hour had grown late.

Even so, she kept on working. Duke Alburn did not go to sleep, either.

The sound of the wind grew frightfully loud, and she'd paused her work when suddenly— "Duke."

The door opened, and Dale appeared. His face was tense.

"More than three hundred mounted soldiers have the castle surrounded. They are the Earl of Downing's troops."

Anne was startled by the news.

Why would the Earl of Downing be here?

Duke Alburn urged her to continue. He did not show any strong emotional reaction to Dale's words.

"And so?"

"They are demanding our surrender. And your arrest, Your Grace."

"I thought he would show up eventually, but he's later than I expected."

Duke Alburn was a strange sight. He was speaking as if the situation was perfectly unremarkable.

"What shall we do?"

"Make them wait. I want to see this."

As Duke Alburn said that, his eyes returned to the sugar candy fairy that was still taking shape. He stared fixedly at the candy, as if someone were there inside the still-vague silhouette.

"I understand," Dale replied. It sounded like he had resigned himself to the worst. He left the room.

"Why is the Earl of Downing calling for your arrest?"

Anne couldn't hold back, and the question left her mouth against her better

judgment.

But Duke Alburn smiled. “I haven’t gone to Lewiston for a year and a half. The earl probably sees my failure to demonstrate obedience as a great pretense for destroying me.”

“You haven’t been going to Lewiston? Why? You put yourself in danger by doing something like that.”

Duke Alburn scowled and sat down in a chair. Then he pointed the tip of his sword toward Anne, as if to threaten her.

“You talk too much, candy crafter. You work on making that.”

“But why?”

“I said shut up!!”

Anne flinched at his angry shouting.

“As if you could ever understand! As if you could know how it feels to have all your dignity stripped away, to be forced to grovel and beg. The only one who could ever understand was her...!!”

Duke Alburn had flown into a sudden rage, but he shut his mouth just as abruptly. He seemed to have realized he had allowed his true feelings to spill forth in the heat of the moment.

Anne timidly raised her head and looked at Duke Alburn. He hung his head, laid his sword on the floor, and sighed deeply. He looked exhausted by the weight of his obsessions.

The room was immaculately tidy. But there wasn’t much besides the simple stone walls, the woolen carpets, and the melancholy rumble of the sea outside the window. This did not seem like a castle of a descendant of King Cedric. Silver Westol Castle, where Hugh lived, was much more luxurious.

A proud family had been relegated to nothing. Yet to protect the order of the kingdom, they had steadfastly endured the humiliation.

Christina must have soothed the duke’s turbulent feelings.

But that fairy had vanished.

In the year and a half since, Duke Alburn had not gone to Lewiston. There was no way he didn't understand the meaning and the result of that decision. And still he had not gone.

He had chosen a slow path to self-destruction.

Losing Christina had driven Duke Alburn into despair. It must have been unbearable, enduring the humiliation without her.

Anne also understood the sorrow of losing a loved one. After her mother passed away, she'd felt that sadness deeply in her heart, and when she felt all alone, she hadn't been able to take even one step.

This man also feels that he's all by himself.

Overwhelming emotion, contained only after much difficulty. Gnawing loneliness giving rise to obsessions that filled the void where that emotion once churned. Delusions eating away at the very mind that had produced them.

If someone going through all that wanted a piece of sugar candy, then Anne intended to make it. She would exactly reproduce her client's memories.

Anne set about her work again. With no time to rest, she mixed in colored powders and kneaded. The only sounds that Anne could hear were those of the wind and the firewood popping in the hearth.

The interior of the room was kept at a comfortable temperature. Anne was dripping with sweat, and she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She knelt down on the floor and repeatedly kneaded the sugar that she would use to make the fairy's wings on top of the stone slab. She needed it to be much, much glossier. Then she needed to stretch it thin like silk.

Suddenly, she felt a cold breeze on her flushed cheeks.

There hadn't been a knock at the door, but she could tell that someone had entered the room. Anne figured it was probably Dale and didn't look up from her work. Duke Alburn seemed to assume the same and continued staring intently at Anne's hands.

Suddenly, there was a voice above Anne's head.

"I've come to get her back."

Anne looked up in surprise at the familiar voice.

“...Challe?”

She couldn't believe it. Her mind was in a bit of a daze because she had been so immersed in her work. She wondered whether she might be looking at a hallucination. Challe Fenn Challe was standing right beside her with his sword in his hand. He had the tip of it pointed at Duke Alburn. The blade was shining, reflecting the flames in the fireplace.

Duke Alburn raised his head and frowned.

“You are...the fairy who was with this crafter? Though I've also heard that you are Mercury's warrior fairy. What did you come here for?”

“I came to get you to give her back. This one.”

“I won't let this candy crafter leave. I'm keeping her here until she makes what I want.”

“In that case, I'll kill you right here and now. I'm sure the Earl of Downing will be thrilled when I bring him your head.”

Anne was still gaping at him. “Challe...is that really you?” she mumbled.

Challe glanced over at Anne. Then he said bluntly, “I'm surprised you could be so foolish.”

Sure enough, he had Challe's sharp tongue. But when Anne heard his frank comment, her eyes grew hot.

“Challe? Why did you come for me? Challe...,” she mumbled. She covered her mouth as her tears threatened to overflow.

“I heard about Jonas from Mithril Lid Pod.”

“Mithril. He really did tell you... Challe, I'm so sorry. Back then, I—”

Her chest was swelling with remorse and with joy.

“You don't need to apologize. Get up. It's dangerous here. Once their preparations are in order, the Earl of Downing's soldiers are going to break through the gate and storm in. You have to get out of this castle before that happens.”

“Ah...but, I... The candy—”

I can't leave right away, she thought.

Duke Alburn stood up slowly. In his hand, he held his unsheathed sword.

“I won't allow that crafter to go. She must continue her work.”

“I'm taking her with me. If you plan to fight, come on.”

Challe held his sword at the ready. In his eyes was a sharpness like polished obsidian.

“Wait!”

Anne leaped at Challe's back.

“Wait, Challe! You too, Duke, please wait. I'm going to stay here and continue to do my job. So please, put away your swords!”

This time it was Challe who turned to look at Anne with surprise.

“Are you insane?”

“I'm serious.”

She looked up at Challe and pleaded with him, “I want to give this project form. I want to make a candy sculpture of this fairy.”

“What are you—?”

“I accepted the job. I promised that I could make it! And I want to. I think I'm capable. So let me. Please.”

Even Duke Alburn was stunned by her words.

Anne wanted to continue her work. She felt confident that she could complete it shortly. She couldn't possibly run away and leave it there as it was. The sculpture was her responsibility.

“Please, let me continue my work!”

“This castle is surrounded by soldiers. If they storm in here, there will be a brawl.”

“I know that.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“I also know that it’s dangerous. But I can’t abandon a job partway through. Please. This is something that only I can do—it’s a matter of pride.”

“...Unbelievable...”

The bloodlust suddenly receded from Challe’s body, and he relaxed. The sword in his hand turned into light and dissolved.

Challe let out a deep sigh. “Finish it, then. But I’m staying here with you.”

Anne turned to Duke Alburn and asked nervously, “Would it be all right if he stays here? If you’ll permit it, he’ll agree to stand down. I’ll be able to continue my work.”

“...Very well.”

Duke Alburn sat back down in his chair, still holding his sword.

Challe moved alongside the wall to watch over Anne as she worked.

Even as she began to make progress in her work again, Anne marveled that Challe was there with her.

Challe came back for me. The misunderstanding was cleared up. He came here to get me. He forgave me.

Her heart was overflowing with joy.

At every important point, Anne paused to confirm things about Christina’s appearance with Duke Alburn.

The shape of her hands and the slenderness of her fingers. The way she’d smiled. How she’d tilted her head. Anne paid attention to every detail. Especially to the colors. In order to faithfully reproduce the light blue of Christina’s hair, Anne made repeated adjustments with tiny amounts of colored powder.

Once the shape of the fairy became clear, Duke Alburn’s expression began to change. Having looked unimpressed earlier, his green eyes now housed the enthusiasm of someone getting what he wished for.

“It looks a lot like her,” Duke Alburn said once her facial features emerged. “It

looks like her. But...the eyes are wrong. Her eyes weren't such a cloudy white."

"What color were they?"

"Silver. A glassy silver that reflected the light."

"Silver, huh?"

Anne pondered the problem.

I can't make silver with my normal techniques. Plus, it needs to be glassy. What should I do here?

Challe regarded Duke Alburn's enthusiasm coldly.

"If she's got those eyes, she will...be Christina," Alburn mumbled.

Challe snickered. It was a scornful laugh.

Alburn noticed Challe's derisive laugh and glared at him.

"What's so funny?" the duke demanded.

"That's a piece of candy."

"It's Christina."

"It's a candy sculpture, made by this girl's hands. What's the point of having her make such a thing?"

When Challe asked that, a self-deprecating smile spread across Duke Alburn's face. "Fairies are born when the energy of an object condenses under the gaze of a living being."

"So?"

"So I requested this form."

"...Huh?"

Anne tilted her head in puzzlement at these unexpected words.

"What do you mean by that?"

"This is Christina's 'essence.' What's more, it's a candy sculpture made of silver sugar, which extends the lives of fairies. Fairies are born from objects. So if I stare at this, what do you think will be born from it? Don't you think there's

a possibility, crafter?”

What do I think will be born from this sculpture of Christina made of silver sugar?

Anne was confused. At first, she didn't understand what Duke Alburn intended. But she quickly figured it out with a start.

“No way... You think Lady Christina will be born again...from this?”

That was impossible.

Christina had been born from the energy of the ocean waves. Even if something was born from the sugar candy, chances were exceedingly slim that it would be Christina herself.

They were practically zero.

“Have you witnessed the moment when a fairy vanishes? They turn into beads of light and disperse into the air. The material that made up Christina's body dissolved and disappeared. So I'm hoping that I can once again give form to that which disintegrated. Fairies can extend their life spans with sugar candy that has a beautiful essence. The better it is, the more it extends their lives. There is some kind of energy in it. The lives of fairies have a connection to that essence. The essence is vital.”

Duke Alburn was obviously deeply delusional. His hopes had no basis in reality.

But Anne couldn't bring herself to argue. Although it was an impossible wish, she didn't have the heart to destroy the man's last hope with the truth.

But Challe was different.

“Ridiculous.”

He mercilessly spurned the idea.

“You can't get back what you lost. No matter how much you cry, or how hard you wish, she's not coming back. No matter how much you stare, any fairy born from something like that will be warped and twisted, for sure.”

“I won't allow you to say another word!” Duke Alburn replied furiously. He

stood up, brandishing his sword.

Challe continued leaning against the wall. With contempt, he said bluntly to Duke Alburn, "Whether I say it or not, that's the truth."

"Stop it, Challe!" Anne tugged at his arm. "Don't say things like that!"

She couldn't stay quiet and watch Challe drive Duke Alburn into a corner with the harshness of reality.

That's when it happened. The whole castle shook.

The three of them gasped in surprise, and at the same time, the door to the room slammed open and Dale burst in.

"They've used explosives. The gate has been breached. The soldiers are coming."

"...So we didn't make it, huh?" Duke Alburn muttered. "I thought it'd be fine if they came anytime, but...I can't believe it. Just when the thing I had given up hope on was nearly completed..."

I want to give this man the fairy he desires.

Anne heard Duke Alburn speak in a weak, human-sounding voice for the first time. That only made her want to complete his candy sculpture more. She had only a little left to do to finish the thing he wanted so much.

The feelings of urgency came with a flash of inspiration.

"Ah...!"

Anne suddenly let go of Challe's arm and picked up a stone bowl that contained silver sugar. She had thought of a way to make the silver color she needed.

"Duke! It's the eyes, right? If I can make the eyes, she'll be perfect, yes? I'm doing it, all right, so watch me."

As she checked with the duke, she searched for a handy pot.

Challe tugged at her arm. He looked worried. "You're still making it when the castle's about to be attacked?!"

"I can't stop when I'm so close to finishing. I'm going to work until the soldiers

come into this room.”

“There’s no need for you to go along with this man’s ridiculous fantasy!”

“I’m not just going along with it! This is my job! I accepted it, so I want to see it through. I’m not pretty, and I’m not smart, and I don’t even have any money. But I’d like to think that in this one way, I’m not inferior to anyone. This is my job, so...so I can’t quit and leave it unfinished.”

Challe stared at Anne. He looked shocked at her words. After a brief silence, he asked, “Is that what you want?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You are a fool.”

“I think I must be. But I want to finish this.”

“If that’s what you want... As you wish.”

Challe placed his hand gently against Anne’s cheek.

“I’ll hold off the soldiers as long as I can. You keep crafting until you are satisfied.”

That was all he said before he turned on his heel and left the room.

Chapter 7

IF I KEEP MY EYES ON YOU

Old castles were built with the assumption that they would see battle, so the lord's chambers were naturally quite well guarded. In the event that enemy soldiers broke in, the guards were expected to protect the lord's quarters until the lord could either escape or take his own life.

Aside from the stairwell in the center of the castle tower, there was no way to reach Duke Alburn's rooms. The central staircase was only just barely wide enough for two adults to walk side by side. Also, because of its tight turns, it was difficult to ascend quickly.

If Challe protected the entrance to that stairwell, no one could get close to the room that held Anne and Duke Alburn.

So the obsidian fairy stood there, sword in hand.

He quietly closed his eyes. He felt uneasy.

Anne was in the room that he was protecting, behind him. That was well and good. The problem was Alburn.

Challe worried that a man so deeply deluded might cause harm to Anne at the slightest provocation. The truth was, he hadn't wanted to leave the two of them behind together.

But Anne so strongly desired to finish her sugar candy sculpture. Challe knew that it certainly was not only for the thousand-cress reward. Neither was it out of simple stubbornness. She was doing it for her personal pride, and her pride as a candy crafter.

“That idiot.”

There was nothing to be done about it. Anne was who she was. If that was what Anne wanted, Challe was going to try to grant her wish.

He could hear the soldiers’ voices and clashing swords outside the castle tower.

They’ll be here soon.

“Over there! It’s that staircase!”

Challe heard a soldier shout. When he opened his eyes, he could see five men rushing toward him, their chain mail rattling.

He readied his sword and ordered, “Stop.”

The soldiers noticed Challe and came to a halt.

“Does the Duke of Philax have a warrior fairy?” asked one of them.

They looked at each other in confusion.

Then another said, “Fairy, move away from there. There’s no use in protecting your master now. We are going to arrest him. You will soon have a new one.”

“Sorry, but I don’t have a master.”

Their expressions grew even more perplexed at his answer.

“I’m not following anyone’s orders, but I absolutely will not let you pass.”

The five soldiers seemed to sense Challe’s determination. They readied their swords.

Still holding his own sword vigilantly at the ready, Challe quickly looked them over.

“Oh—no, stop, stop!”

Just then, a voice came from behind the soldiers. Walking toward them from the other end of the dark corridor, holding a lamp in his hand, was Hugh. He was followed by Salim, who was holding a sword that was filthy with blood.

The soldiers’ eyes went wide when they saw Hugh, who had appeared out of nowhere.

“Silver Sugar Viscount? Why are you here? We thought you were waiting in the tent with the Earl of Downing...”

“I had planned to wait there, but I told the earl that if my old friend was going to be captured, I wanted to go see it firsthand, and he gave me his permission. We cut across the battle on Salim’s horse and made it this far. Anyway, you guys should give up on engaging him in a duel. All five of you will die.”

As he said that, Hugh stepped out in front of the five soldiers. “I heard from Salim that you went off on your own to save Anne. But why are you protecting Alburn, Challe?”

“I’m not really protecting him. I’m just buying some time. Don’t come through here for a little while.”

“Now that it’s come to this, there’s no longer any way for Alburn to escape. I want to get to him before the soldiers do and take him into custody uninjured. That’s all. Let me pass, Challe. The more it seems like he resisted, the worse the position he will be in.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you pass.”

“Why not?”

“They need time. That’s what she wants.”

“She? Anne? I don’t know what they’re doing up there, but just let me pass.”

“I refuse.”

Hugh clicked his tongue. He looked annoyed.

“You haven’t forgotten, have you? Your wing is right here.”

Hugh dug quietly through his inner breast pocket while staring at Challe with a sharp look in his eye. Challe felt a jolt run up his spine, the sensation he got before his wing was abused. He gritted his back teeth and grimaced.

“If that’s what you want to do, go ahead.”

“I am your master,” Hugh declared.

“I have no master,” Challe repeated.

Their resolute gazes locked.



“Her eyes were silver and glassy, right?”

Anne put a handful of silver sugar into a small saucepan. She quickly brought it over to the fireplace and held the bottom of the saucepan over the tips of the flames.

“What are you trying to do?” Duke Alburn mumbled, seeming overwhelmed by Anne’s vigor. He couldn’t hide his surprise and confusion at the fact that she had declared she would continue making her candy sculpture right up to the end, even after the soldiers broke in.

“I’m making the silver eyes.”

The silver sugar began to dissolve in the heated saucepan. It transformed into a thick, transparent liquid.

Small air bubbles simmered up from the bottom of the pan.

“Okay.”

When Anne took the saucepan off the fire, she headed straight for the stone slab of the workbench. She dumped the melted silver sugar out on top in one smooth motion. The transparent liquid sugar spread out thickly. Anne cooled it with cold water and touched it with her fingers.

“Ah...!”

She drew her hand back from the heat for a moment. But she chilled her fingers again in the cold water and divided the quickly hardening liquid sugar into pieces about the size of her thumbnail. She pulled off two chunks. The liquid was getting thicker before her eyes. She had two small globs of silver sugar that were a soft, jellylike texture. She rolled them into balls on top of the stone slab.

Once silver sugar is melted, its nature changes. It hardens as it cools and becomes transparent like glass.

Anne rolled the melted silver sugar with her palm on the top of the stone slab

until it took the shape of two beautiful spheres.

The small spheres looked like tiny crystal balls.

She pinched the two of them between her fingers and held them up to the lamp. The orange light distorted and glistened through the transparent globes. Anne stared intently at them, then nodded.

“Mm. This works.”

Then she put her hands on the head of her sugar candy sculpture. She made hollows where the eyes would go. Eye sockets. In the back of each eye socket, she packed silver sugar that she combined with gray coloring. She inserted the spheres that she had just made into the eye sockets.

She added eyelids and made eyelashes. She rolled the eyelashes one by one between her fingertips, holding her breath as she created the fine hairs. She attached dozens of them to the sculpture. Then she took a needle and cut the tips of the eyelashes even finer.

Come out.

Subconsciously, she prayed in her heart.

Right here. In this silver sugar. Appear.

She implored her own fingers. Begged them to create the essence that Duke Alburn wished would appear.

“...This is...”

Duke Alburn groaned and stood up as if in a trance.

The sweat running down Anne’s forehead as she formed the eyelashes with her needle got into her eyes and blurred her vision. But she didn’t have time to waste wiping away the sweat, so she continued her work.

Duke Alburn slowly approached the candy sculpture.

Anne suddenly stopped moving the needle. Her instinct told her that she had accomplished something.

I think...I can stop.

Anne lowered her arms and looked at the sculpture as a whole.

A pair of silver eyes was looking down at her.

“Christina,” Duke Alburn whispered.

Anne breathed a sigh of relief and smiled.

“Have I managed to make a sugar candy sculpture that meets Your Grace’s expectations?”

Looking down at the life-sized candy sculpture of the fairy, Duke Alburn mumbled, “It’s her.”

The sculpture was bizarrely large for a piece of sugar candy. But the figure of the fairy, standing there in a totally natural pose, wasn’t remarkable just for its size. With her light-blue coloring, she looked ephemeral enough to disappear at any moment. Even so, as Anne stared at her, it was clear from the hair that rippled down like flowing water, and from her gently smiling mouth, and from her silver eyes, that she was stunningly lovely.

She had probably stood quietly by Alburn’s side, always with a soft smile. That was the kind of woman she must have been. Somehow or other, Anne could tell.

“I did it, huh? Thank goodness.”

Anne smiled with relief. Duke Alburn looked at her. For a short while, he said nothing.

“Crafter...I never asked your name.”

“It’s Halford. My name is Anne Halford.”

“Halford, huh?”

He repeated the question as if to make sure, then looked back at the sugar candy fairy again.

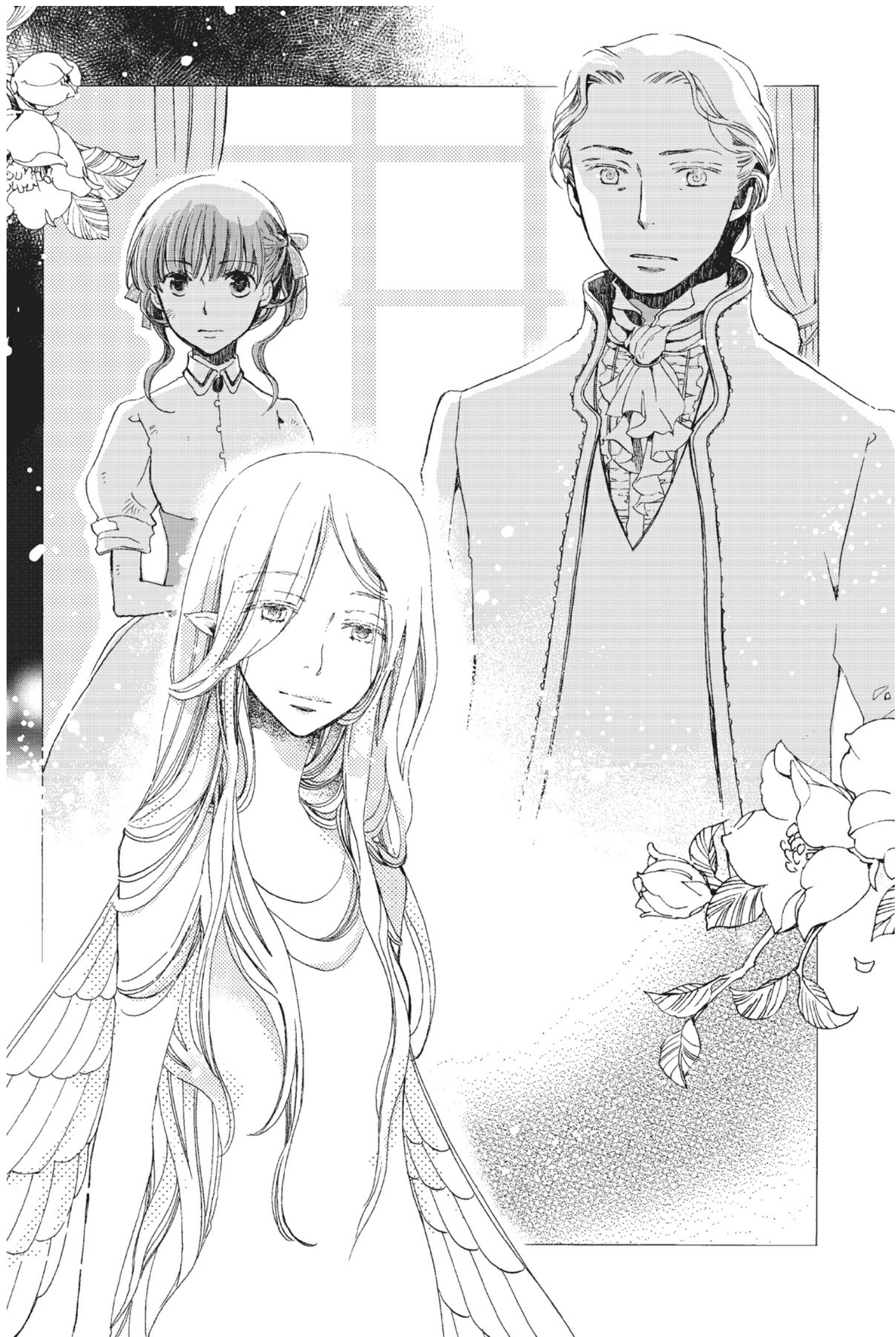
“I...I wanted this. Halford.”

“Yes.”

“It’s a funny thing. Now that I have it before my eyes, I understand much better. Just as that fairy said, there is no way that a living creature, brimming with love, could be born from this empty essence... But...I wanted it. From the

moment I first thought it might be possible, I wanted it so badly that I could hardly stand it... I wanted to see her again.”

Duke Alburn spoke matter-of-factly. It was as if the powerful delusion that had been enveloping him until now had completely disappeared.



Standing before Anne was a young man who was intellectual and reasonable, who was of noble standing, but who had also suffered terrible misfortune.

Anne was certain that this reasonable side of him had been there in the depths of his mind, even when he had requested the candy sculpture in his state of obsession. Torn between reason and delusion, he had suffered greatly.

If he had lost himself to the delusion, then right now, in this moment, the duke would surely be overwhelmed with joy.

He had gotten the thing that he had so desperately desired.

When she looked at Duke Alburn's expression, miserable in spite of all that, Anne's chest hurt. She thought of the blue aura of madness she had sensed enveloping Alburn's whole body just moments earlier. She realized that it had actually been the color of sadness and despair.

"No matter how foolish an idea it was, I wanted it. I simply wanted it."

"No one's proven anything yet," Anne said without thinking.

Duke Alburn slowly turned to look at Anne.

"Fairies are born from the energy of objects and the gaze of living creatures," she continued. "If this is a perfect copy of Lady Christina, then maybe, just maybe...if you think of her and keep staring at this, then perhaps something will awaken in it in time. Until it does, no one has proven anything."

Duke Alburn smiled at her words. "It makes me happy that you're trying to console me. Certainly, this sugar sculpture is a perfect image of Christina. It's so perfect that I wouldn't be surprised if it did come alive... Halford?"

"Yes?"

"There is a leather pouch on the desk over there. There are ten gold pieces in it. You can take it and go."

"Is that all right?"

"I promised. You don't need to hesitate. You can take it and go back to your fairy. Go."

Anne did as she was told and picked up the leather pouch. It was incredibly

heavy. From the sound of the coins clanging against each other inside, she was certain they were gold.

“All right. I accept.”

She bowed slightly, then headed for the door.

“Halford.”

Just as she was about to exit, Duke Alburn called out to stop her. When she turned around, he was smiling. It was a tender smile, but he looked like he might burst into tears at any moment.

“You are the finest of candy crafters.”

Anne returned his smile. She hoped that now, the young man before her would find some solace.

“Thank you very much.”



Hugh and Challe glared at each other.

Hugh’s hand, still inside the interior pocket of his jacket, tensed slightly. Challe frowned, feeling discomfort ripple through his whole body.

Will he go through with it?

Then suddenly, the pain disappeared. Hugh was looking up at the staircase, over Challe’s shoulder.

“Anne?” Hugh murmured.

Challe turned to look behind him.

Anne was coming down the dimly lit staircase. She was grasping a leather pouch tightly in both hands, holding it in front of her chest. Her gait was unsteady. Anne seemed to notice Challe standing there. She broke into a broad smile.

“Challe... Huh? Hugh?”

The moment she called their names, Anne missed her footing. With an abrupt shriek, she began to tumble.

“Anne!”

Hugh shouted, but Challe was faster. His sword vanished, and he caught Anne as she fell. It took some effort to stand straight from the impact of her suddenly landing in his arms. Once he was confident that he had caught her, Challe took a breath and looked down at Anne’s face.

Anne was obviously still dazed by her sudden fall. She stared up at Challe with big round eyes.

“Challe. Th...thank you.”

Normally Challe would have wanted to make a comment about her carelessness. However, he was so relieved that Anne had returned safely that he didn’t say anything at all. He silently lowered Anne to the floor, then hugged her tightly.

“Challe?”

Anne said his name in wonder.

Hugh approached the two of them.

“You’re not injured, Anne?” he asked.

“That’s really you, isn’t it, Hugh? What are you doing here?” Anne replied, still in Challe’s arms.

“For a number of reasons, I came to arrest the Duke of Philax. Is he upstairs?”

“Yeah. He’s there. Along with his sugar candy.”

Anne seemed somewhat satisfied as she gave that answer.

“Sugar candy? One that you made?”

“That’s right. A candy sculpture of someone named Lady Christina.”

Just for a moment, Hugh made a pained expression. “I see,” he said.

“The duke seems to have prepared himself for this. So don’t be too rough on

him, please, Hugh.”

Hugh shrugged. “I’m the Silver Sugar Viscount. I’m not looking for a fight. Rest assured.”

Then he turned to Salim and the five soldiers behind him and jerked his chin up toward the stairs.

“You heard the lady. No rough treatment. One of you guys go outside and tell the Earl of Downing. Tell him the Duke of Philax has been detained and to stop the fight. Salim, you lead the other four and go to the room above. I’m sure you know where it is. I’ll follow after you.”

One of the soldiers ran off, headed out of the castle tower. Accompanied by the other four soldiers, Salim went up the stairs.

Hugh watched them go, then took a small leather pouch out of his breast pocket.

“I thought I’d give this back.”

It was the pouch that contained Challe’s wing.

Anne cocked her head. “That’s...Challe’s. Why do you have it?”

“I took it from him, but even while I had it, he didn’t listen to a single thing I said. I don’t need it. Here.”

Hugh casually tossed the wing in Challe’s direction.

Challe caught it.

“I’ll have my revenge.”

“Whaa?!” Hugh made an exaggerated expression of surprise at Challe’s words. “But why? I gave the wing back. I did the same thing as Anne, so why will you let her be but take your revenge on me? That’s discrimination!” Hugh grinned and went up the stairs.

Finally, it was quiet, and Anne realized she had been pressed against Challe’s chest that whole time.

“Ah! Why am I—?!”

In her surprise, she struggled, trying to escape from Challe’s embrace. But

Challe did not allow it. He held her even tighter. Anne seemed to sense that and stopped moving.

“Challe?”

Her face turned red before his eyes. But he didn’t care; he kept on hugging her.

“What’s the matter? Hey. Um, oh, that’s right! I got the thousand cress. I’m holding it right here.”

Challe felt her move the leather pouch that she was holding in both hands in front of his chest slightly.

“Hey, Challe?”

“Don’t move, just for a minute.”

“Ah...but—”

He heard the agitation in her voice but hugged her even tighter. Anne cast her eyes downward.

“...O-okay,” she replied obediently, and she stopped moving.

“You idiot. Don’t make me worry like that.”

“Sorry. But I’m a candy crafter, so... But I’m sorry.”

“Anne.”

He mumbled her name, as if checking to make sure she was safe. When he did, Anne whispered to herself.

“That’s the second time...”

Challe heard her.

“Second time for what?”

“You didn’t call me *scarecrow*, or *you idiot*, or *blockhead*. You called me Anne. You called me by my name. Just now was the second time.”

Challe’s eyes went wide at her words.

“You’re counting every time that I do something like that? Why?”

“I mean, it makes me happy when you call me by my name, so...”

It does?!

He was slightly shocked. If such a trivial thing could make Anne happy or sad, he was convinced he would never be able to understand her peculiar behavior.

These humans are utterly impossible to understand.

Anne was especially confounding, even more so than Liz. At least he had been able to predict Liz’s behavior.

But he could never tell what Anne was going to do. He hadn’t expected her to keep working on her candy sculpture in front of that Alburn person, knowing that the castle was surrounded by soldiers. She had declared, with strong determination in her eyes, that it was her own desire to do so. Challe didn’t know any other girl with such a resolute gaze.

He was completely baffled.

Yet for some reason, it was not an unpleasant feeling. In fact, it was even kind of interesting. He found that curious as well.

For the time being, Challe made up his mind to do his best to call Anne by her name.

“Challe,” Anne whispered, in a shaky voice. “I want you to stay with me. From now on, okay?”

Instead of answering, Challe embraced her even more tightly.

He still didn’t understand the reason why. But he was relieved to have her back.

Anne’s body was very warm. She felt soft and delicate in his arms.



Alburn, the Duke of Philax, was arrested by Hugh Mercury, the Silver Sugar Viscount, and sent to Lewiston in the custody of the Earl of Downing.

A month later, John Black, cousin of His Majesty Edmond II, was newly conferred peerage as the Duke of Philax.

Everyone expected Alburn to be executed.

But even in prison, Alburn was the same intellectual and gentle young man he had always been. He said his detention was not undeserved because he had been obviously negligent in his duties.

Even the heart of the Earl of Downing, who had been at the forefront of the scheming for the destruction of House Alburn, seemed moved by his admirable attitude. The king, who had always been sympathetic toward Alburn, was naturally against a severe punishment.

Ultimately, Alburn was stripped of his rank. Then he was placed under house arrest, supervised by the Earl of Downing, in a small castle on the outskirts of Westol. He was not allowed any contact with the outside world or permitted to marry.

Fairies took care of all his everyday necessities. There was some concern that allowing human girls to attend him might eventually result in the birth of an heir. The Alburn line was to come to an end with William's generation. He would be a prisoner for the rest of his life.

Nonetheless, Alburn apparently lived out his days in peace. He was no longer forced to publicly grovel before the king. In a way, being a prisoner allowed him to better protect his pride.

The sugar candy sculpture of the fairy that he had commissioned sat in his room. He stared at it every day, never tiring of it.

Although he had been deposed by force, the former duke still received exceptionally generous treatment.

That was what people said when they gossiped about him.

"The Duke of Philax got his hands on a magnificent work of sugar candy. There's no question it brought him incredible fortune," they said.

Eventually, the candy crafter who had created the piece also became the subject of much gossip.



“Hello again, ma’am!”

When Anne opened the door to the Weather Vane on the western outskirts of Lewiston, the eyes of the innkeeper, who was serving meals to customers, lit up in a flash.

“Is that you, missy?! You did it, huh?”

The innkeeper dropped the plates on her customers’ table and rushed over.

Then she squeezed Anne in a tight hug.

“Ma’am? What happened? What did I do?” Anne asked.

“Everyone’s talking about it! They’re saying someone made a candy sculpture that pleased the Duke of Philax, and that it’s brought him the most wonderful good fortune. And the name of that candy crafter is Anne Halford!”

“They are?”

Anne was shocked. Apparently, the rumors had made it to Lewiston before she had.

It had been three days since she’d left Philax Castle. Anne had spent them in the port city. After recovering from her exhaustion, she had come back to Lewiston again.

She was planning to secure lodgings for the winter and spend an enjoyable New Year’s in the royal capital. The funds for doing so would come from the thousand cress that Duke Alburn had paid her. She had more than enough money. But since she was frugal by nature, she wanted to choose a place that was cheap, safe, and suited to her social standing.

So she had returned to the Weather Vane.

The innkeeper released Anne and grinned at Challe and Mithril, who were standing behind her.

“Great to see you two again as well.”

At her words, the customers eating lunch seemed to take an interest in Anne's party.

A man who seemed to be a peddler spoke to her from a nearby table. "So you're the candy crafter everyone's gossiping about? You're awfully young. How much do you charge to make something?"

"I charge two cress for the largest size, or if it's something complicated."

"Wow, that's pretty reasonable. My wife is expecting a child soon. Maybe I could ask you to make the celebration candy?"

"Sure, certainly!"

"I think you'd better give up on that idea. On getting her to make you sugar candy," an unenthusiastic voice said just then.

It came from the corner where the young men from the Radcliffe Workshop were sitting. Jonas was among them. Anne made eye contact, but he quickly averted his eyes.

"That girl seduced the Silver Sugar Viscount," one of the young men insisted. "And nobody knows exactly how she managed to please the Duke of Philax, right? Right, Jonas?"

Jonas's gaze drifted restlessly around as he answered in a small voice. "Uh, yeah...I guess. But that's..."

"What's with you, mumbling to yourself? We all saw it when our Jonas here won the duke's approval, so we can vouch for him, but—"

"But even if she somehow deceived the Duke of Philax and then made sugar candy for him, if the candy was poorly made, it wouldn't bring him good luck, would it?" said a woman who looked like a shopkeeper, sitting at the counter.

"That's right. The Duke of Philax got unbelievably generous treatment thanks to the sugar candy that girl made being in his possession. He had incredibly good fortune. That must be the power of the candy, right?" the woman who ran the inn agreed.

"So you admit she made that sugar candy sculpture, then?" Suddenly, a young man sitting near the group spoke up.

The troublemakers were at a loss for words. Jonas fidgeted in his seat, looking more and more uncomfortable.

“Now, you guys need to knock it off with this ugly behavior,” continued the newcomer. “You’ll damage the name of the Radcliffe Workshop.”

The young men all glared at him angrily.

But when the newcomer stood up and looked in their direction, the group shouted in surprise.

“Keith...! You’re... Why are you in a place like this...?” Jonas mumbled.

The man whom Jonas had called Keith slowly looked at him and the other youths. “I come here sometimes to have lunch. Didn’t you know? Now scram, all of you. I don’t want you to do anything else embarrassing.”

“But Keith! We really did. This girl, she—”

One of the young men raised his voice and started to make excuses. Keith playfully held his index finger up in front of his lips and shushed him. But his eyes were not laughing.

“Please, shut up before I get unpleasant.”

The young men were silent in the face of his quiet intimidation. They exchanged looks with one another and stood up out of their seats.

“Fine. If you say so, Keith, we’ll leave.”

“It would make me very happy if you did.”

The young men walked past Anne and the others. They tried not to look at her as they left. Only Jonas glanced in her direction. But when their eyes met, he quickly looked away again and hurried out the door. Cathy, who was following along behind Jonas, glared at Anne as she always did—as if she were her mortal enemy—and then left.

Once the young men had gone, the one they had called Keith left a large payment on top of the table. Then he turned to the innkeeper. “I’m sorry for causing a scene. I’ll get out of your hair, too.”

He slowly headed for the door, pausing for a moment in front of Anne.

He had light-brown hair and deep-blue eyes that almost looked purple. His face seemed thoughtful and composed. He wore an elegant jacket that went down to his knees.

“My colleagues said some rude things. Please forgive them.”

“Ah, not at all. Don’t worry about it.”

With a faint smile, the young man left. Anne watched him go and tilted her head in puzzlement.

Someone from the Radcliffe Workshop?

As she stared at the door, Anne felt the innkeeper clap a hand down on her shoulder.

“Well, welcome, again,” she said with a grin. “Will you be staying? Or are you just here for a meal?”

Anne turned around and pulled herself together. With a smile, she answered, “We’re staying, and we’re eating. Both.”

“Yippee! A hot meal! Anne. Challe Fenn Challe. Let’s sit over here. This table is closest to the heater. They’re the best seats in the house.”

Bouncing lightly on his way, Mithril headed for a table in the back of the room. Even though he didn’t feel the cold, he had chosen to sit close to the heater so Anne would be more comfortable. She appreciated his consideration.

Speaking of appreciation, she was also happy about how kind the innkeeper of the Weather Vane was toward the fairies. She had made a point of telling Challe and Mithril that it was nice to see them.

The innkeeper, the owner of the establishment, had welcomed the fairies. This was one place where the proprietor allowed fairies and humans to eat together. She informed all her other customers that it was so. Anyone with a complaint just had to leave.

“I wonder what I should get to eat? But first I want to get some warm wine and put plenty of sugar in it, then squeeze in a lemon and drink it. That’s my winter go-to, so I definitely gotta have that,” Mithril stated.

Then when he got to his seat, he eagerly looked up at the blackboard hanging

on the wall, where the words *Daily Special Menu* were written in chalk.

“Let’s go sit, too, Challe. I’m also hungry. I want some of the Weather Vane’s famous bean soup and a piece of walnut bread. Then, for my main course, maybe something like chicken roasted with herb salt would be nice. I might order dessert, too.”

Rubbing her belly, Anne headed for the table. When she did, Challe muttered from beside her, “You want to eat that much?”

“I mean, sure. I’m hungry. Is there something wrong with that? Oh, I get it. You’re worried I’ll get fat?”

“No matter how much a scarecrow eats, I doubt she can get that big. Hurry up and take your seat, Anne.”

“*Scarecrow* again... Ah...but...”

Feeling some minor discomfort, Anne sat down. Then she tilted her head and fixed her eyes on Challe. Over the past few days, she had decided to ask him about something that had been on her mind.

Once he had taken his seat, Challe noticed that she was staring at him. “What is it?” he inquired. “You’re making a strange face.”

“Say, Challe? You did it again just now. Over these past three days, you’ve been calling me by my name sometimes, haven’t you? Why?”

Anne was very happy about it, but it also made her feel uncomfortable. She could not stop wondering why Challe suddenly felt inclined to call her by her name.

“I thought you said you were happier when I did that. So I’ve been trying to make an effort.”

“Wait, so... Before, when you called me *scarecrow* and *you idiot* and all the other things, you mean that you weren’t really trying to put me down, or to be mean?! You just casually called me a scarecrow again now... Are you telling me you didn’t do that on purpose?”

When Anne asked him this in surprise, Challe made a complicated face.

“...Did you think I was really so cruel?”

“It wasn’t malicious...?”

So that means...Challe’s nasty words...just come naturally to him?

Anne was dumbfounded.

The aromas of bean soup, warm wine, and carefully smoked meat wafted from the kitchen. Along with the warmth from the heater, the smells of food put everyone at ease.

Mithril sniffed at the air, ecstatically inhaling the scents.

Challe seemed to find it amusing that Anne had genuinely thought he was being mean on purpose. He cast his eyes downward and chuckled a little.

Anne stared at his long eyelashes as he laughed and felt overjoyed. She was happy that he was there with her. She was happy that he was laughing. The sweet feelings she had for him still stirred in her heart. But she didn’t feel that strange air of tension anymore.

Challe is here. That’s enough. And Mithril is with me, too.

It was enough for her to feel relieved and content. Anne couldn’t help but smile.

“So what’ll it be?”

The innkeeper called out to them from behind the counter in a cheerful voice.

In that moment, all three of them were happy in their own ways.



AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone. I'm Miri Mikawa.

I'm happy to have made it through the sequel to *Sugar Apple Fairy Tale* and grateful to be able to continue writing like this.

At the end of the previous volume, *The Silver Sugar Master and the Obsidian Fairy*, I found myself thinking, *Anne found happiness! That's wonderful!*

But my excitement suddenly cooled when it came time to write the sequel.

Anne missed her chance to become a Silver Sugar Master. She had basically no money. Yet she had to support two fairies. What a harsh situation for a fifteen-year-old—

But ahhh, amazing things are happening!

I did consider starting the story a year later, after Anne had somehow managed to survive by doing something or other, and I even came up with a plot, but I didn't think I would be forgiven for such a significant time skip. I told myself I couldn't gloss over the hard stuff, and I steeled my resolve.

As a result, this story picks up about two months after the end of the last volume.

I also had the pleasure of writing a *Sugar Apple Fairy Tale* short story for *Beans* 15, a magazine that should have gone on sale just a little bit before this book is published. That one starts three days after the end of the first volume. The Silver Sugar Master who gave Anne the cape she is wearing appears in it. So does another little fairy who's Mithril-sized. And get this: It comes with a four-panel comic drawn by Aki and a color pinup of Challe. Truly extravagant. It's miraculous. I implore you to get your hands on that, too.

This time, like with the last book, I really caused all sorts of trouble for my editor. I'm forever grateful that you always look after me cheerfully and kindly in spite of that. I'll be relying on you in the future as well.

Now, Aki. When I see your illustrations of Anne, my heart can't help but flutter, and when I see Challe, I feel weak in the knees. I want to keep Mithril in my pocket like a pet. Thank you so much. I feel deeply fortunate to have you drawing for me.

I also received a lot of letters. I was truly overjoyed by the words of encouragement and the thoughts that you all shared in your letters. So I hope from the bottom of my heart that you'll be just as pleased when you read this book.

I'm able to keep writing because there are people kind enough to read my work. I feel deeply, deeply grateful to all of you.

Well then, I do hope we meet again.

Miri Mikawa



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